



**“This is not a school, it’s a zoo. There are the animals”:  
Death at an early age by Jonathan Kozol and the injustices and violence promoted by  
the American school system in the 1960s<sup>1</sup>**

“Isto aqui não é escola, é zoológico. Lá estão os animais”:  
*Morte em tenra idade* de Jonathan Kozol e as injustiças e violências promovidas pelo  
sistema escolar americano na década de 1960

“Esto aquí no es escuela, es zoológico. Allá están los animales”:  
*Muerte a una edad temprana* de Jonathan Kozol y las injusticias y violencias promovidas por  
el sistema escolar americano en la década de 1960

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## Abstract

This manuscript deals with the relationships between teachers and students and the oppressions, violence and inequalities present in the North American school system. For this purpose, the analysis of Jonathan Kozol’s memoirs, who in his book *Death at an Early Age* (1960) recounts his brief experience as a teacher in a segregated school in Boston-USA, is here presented. At the time when he published his teaching autobiography, Kozol offered an important work to question public education in his country. In addition, his story unfolds the school day by showing the pedagogical contents, teaching approaches and abusive behaviors of his professional colleagues to their students who, not corresponding to their representations of excellence, ended up suffering physical and symbolic violence, such as those perceiving the school as a “zoo” and the students as “animals”. His book evidences what we automate and naturalize and give us literature as a tool for education in the knowledge of social, historical and psychological reality.

**Keywords:** Pedagogical relationship. Autobiographical memoirs. Violence.

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## Resumo

O artigo trata das relações entre professores e alunos e das opressões, violências e desigualdades presentes no sistema escolar norte-americano. Para tanto, examina as memórias de Jonathan Kozol, que no livro *Morte em tenra idade*, escrito em 1960, narra sua breve experiência como docente de uma escola segregada de Boston, nos Estados Unidos. Na ocasião da publicação de sua autobiografia docente, o autor ofereceu ao público uma importante obra para o questionamento da escola pública de seu país. Além do quê, seu relato desvela o cotidiano escolar evidenciando os conteúdos escolares, as formas de ensinar e as condutas abusivas de seus colegas de profissão em relação aos alunos, que não correspondendo às suas representações de excelência, acabavam sofrendo violências físicas e simbólicas, como as que apresentavam a percepção da escola como sendo um “zoológico” e a dos estudantes como sendo “animais”. Seu livro lança luz àquilo que automatizamos e naturalizamos e mostra-nos a literatura como possibilidade de formação e de conhecimento da realidade social, histórica e psicológica.

**Palavras-chave:** Relação pedagógica. Memórias autobiográficas. Violências.

## Resumen

El artículo trata de las relaciones entre profesores y alumnos y de las opresiones, violencias y desigualdades presentes en el sistema escolar norteamericano. Para eso, examina las memorias de Jonathan Kozol, que en el libro *Muerte a una edad temprana*, escrito en 1960, narra su breve experiencia como docente de una escuela segregada de Boston, en los Estados Unidos. En el momento en que publicó su autobiografía docente, el autor ofreció al público una importante obra para cuestionar la enseñanza pública de su país. Además, que su relato revela el día a día escolar evidenciando los contenidos escolares, las formas de enseñanza y las conductas abusivas de sus colegas de profesión con los alumnos que, no correspondiendo a sus representaciones de excelencia, acababan sufriendo violencia física y simbólica, como aquellas que se presentaban percibiendo la escuela como un “zoológico” y los estudiantes como “animales”. Su libro evidencia aquello que automatizamos y naturalizamos y nos muestra la literatura como posibilidad de formación y de conocimiento de la realidad social, histórica y psicológica.

**Palabras-clave:** Relación pedagógica. Memorias autobiográficas. Violencias.

## Introduction

Some time ago, while reading the book *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on my life and work*, authored by Paulo Freire (2015), I came across the indication of *Death at an early age*<sup>2</sup>, written by Jonathan Kozol (1983)<sup>3</sup>, a North American teacher who reports his experience as a substitute teacher between the years of 1964 and 1965 at a school located in a ghetto in the City of Boston. When reading the impressions of Freire related to the work that he had read “in almost one sitting” (op.cit., p.7) I decided to look for it. In possession of the book, which was bought at affordable prices at a second-hand bookstore, I understood the enthusiasm that the reading had caused him, because just like him: “as I read, everything in the book touched me strongly, demanding my total focus, not letting me put it down” (op. cit., p. 198).

Kozol (1983) unveils the everyday of the school where he worked and thus presents elements that help us to think about pedagogical issues, about the relationships established in the school and, above all, about the existing inequalities in the school system and the conduct of teachers in relation to students, who in its vast majority, did not meet the representations of student excellence idealized by them and, therefore, ended up living the school experience in a tortuous way, since they were subjected to both physical violence - not only allowed but regulated by the statute of institutions of the time -, and the symbolic and more difficult to be perceived one, as they were consubstantiated in the prejudiced speeches and in the stigmas used by the teachers to refer to the black population. Such visions were also reaffirmed by the books to which students had access. Many of them reaffirmed the inferior position of the black people referring to them as “ignorant” to whom the white man, whose attitudes were seen as exemplary, should teach how to live correctly (“The white men who have entered Africa are teaching the natives how to live”) (op. cit., p.84). The aim was “to replace a very substantial and by no means barren lower-class culture with a concoction of pretty shopworn middle-class ideas” (op. cit., p.88).

Absurdities such as those mentioned above were not only found among teaching practices and in textbooks but were also guided by the curriculum of the City of Boston, which mirrored such positions contributing to the erasure of history and the references of the black population for considering them as less civilized. It would be up to the teachers to guide the students to the really precious knowledge, and to do so, unreasonable reprimands and physical aggressions were not spared, much more for the correction of behaviors and conducts than for the teaching of children. The contempt for the activities of the students and the judgments made about them functioned as negative consecrations of the *habitus* of the students (BOURDIEU, 1989).

In this article, the teaching autobiography of Kozol (1983) is taken as a possibility of knowledge of reality, as it allows the discussion and the reflection on everyday school life.

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<sup>2</sup> As this article was originally written in Brazilian Portuguese, the title of the books written by Freire (2015) and Kozol (1983) appear in that language in the section *References*.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Kozol was born in Boston, the United States of America, in 1936. He was a writer, a progressive activist and educator known for his books about public education in his country. He graduated in English Literature at Harvard University and, posteriorly, studied fiction in Paris. After returning to the United States, he became a teacher at public schools in Boston. He was fired for teaching a poem by Langston Hughes, as described in the book *Death at an Early Age*, where he reports his first year as a teacher. Because of this work, Kozol received a National Book Award in Science, Philosophy and Religion. After his dismissal, he got deeply involved in the civil rights movement. He also taught at the public schools of Newton, the scholar district he had attended as a child. He taught there for several years before getting more deeply involved in the social justice work and dedicating more time to writing. Kozol founded *The Education Action Fund*, a non-profit charity fund which offers direct assistance to many children and families mentioned in his books. Among his most important works are *Rachel and Her Children*, a study about homeless mothers and their children, which received the *Robert F. Kennedy Book Award* and *Savage Inequalities*, which was a finalist of the *National Book Critics Circle Award*, in 1992. For *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*, Kozol received, in 1996, the *Anisfield-Wolf Book Award*, an honor conceived before the works of Langston Hughes e Martin Luther King.

Through the memories of the author and his denunciation of the perversities committed in the institution where he worked, the text that follows seeks to contribute to an analysis of what we often naturalize and automate during the development of teaching work.

**“- It is the absence of a tail which convinces him that he has not yet become a rat.”**

Through all the reading of the report of Kozol (1983) I kept thinking about the marks which were left by a schooling which was more likely to destroy the students and highlight how inappropriate they were to correspond to what was expected by the teachers. The boy Stephen, at the age of eight, seemed to be the most inappropriate among all the students. That is what the mentions made about him in several moments of the narrative made me think. Coming from a completely precarious social situation and living in State custody, the boy was unable to do any of the schoolwork properly. He was in the fourth year, although his performance barely reached the level of the second, and he was very poor at mathematics and reading. But, even though he did very poorly in schoolwork, Stephen was a great artist, and precisely because his drawings were very good and authentic, they caused him serious problems, because they were not “neat and orderly and organized” (op. cit., 20) as the Art teacher, who privileged mimeographed pictures which should be colored according to what she stipulated, wanted them. The boy reacted to the reprimands and impositions detaching himself from reality and moving to a world of his own. When the teacher noticed his attitude, not caring if she was destroying a human being, she said: “Give me that! Your paints are all muddy! You’ve made it a mess. Look at what he’s done! He’s mixed up the colors! I don’t know why we waste good paper on this child!” (op. cit., p.21). And, in the face of these and other types of violence, Stephen “in many ways already dying, died a second and third and fourth and final death before her anger” (op. cit., p.21). The curious thing is that during the entire reading I could not perceive, except for those who wrote the book denouncing the torture to which those children were subjected, not even any effort to teach them and try to provide them with the dispositions that the teachers diagnosed they lacked. They were often punished for not having what is usually the result of the access that a privileged social origin allows. What was asked of the students presupposed learning in most cases developed outside the school, away from the school and before school (CATANI; GALLEGO, 2009). But would it not be the job of the school to try to help them acquire these dispositions? What is the use of an institution that enshrines those who are better able to deal with it and who need less school investments to go smoothly through schooling?

In the course of the narrative, it is difficult to know whether in that school which was segregated and forgotten by the public authorities any student would correspond to the ideal of the teachers, as the fact of being black plus the condition of being poor seemed to put them, at first, diametrically distant of what is considered good and virtuous. Using the discourse that they educated those children by offering them instruction and knowledge which were essential to their lives, countless cruelties were committed. There were several ways to open this inadequacy and punish it. Physical punishment was one of them, as allowed by the *Boston Teachers' Handbook*, which assured teachers the right to execute them, as can be seen in the excerpt below:

The Boston Teachers' Handbook also contains these rules: "Corporal punishment shall not be inflicted when it might aggravate an existing physical impairment or produce or threaten to produce permanent or lasting injury. Cases of corporal punishment shall be reported by each teacher on the dates of their occurrence in writing.

These reports shall state the name of the pupil, the name of the witness, the amount of punishment, and the reason therefor..." (op. cit., p. 26).

Some teachers were sober in relation to physical aggression and did not intend to openly address the issue, but others could not contain an unmistakable kind of satisfaction for the deeds, revealing themselves perverse when reporting their experiences and giving advice to their professional colleagues about the best way to act. Sometimes, they referred to the beatings cynically or humorously, demonstrating all their pleasure in administering them:

"- When you do it, you want to snap it abruptly or else you are not going to get the kind of effect you want." (op. cit., p. 31)

"- Leave it over-night in vinegar or water if you want it to really sting the hands." (op. cit., p. 31)

"- Do not worry about the law. You just make damn sure that no one's watching." (op. cit., p.31)

"- Don't let them get too close to you. No matter how you feel. The ones you help the most are the first ones who will axe you in the back" (op. cit., p. 31)

"- The ones I can't stand are the goddamn little buggers. The First Graders. And the Second Graders. There's nothing you can do to them – you can't even lift up your goddamn hand." (op. cit., p. 31)

Symbolic violence was also committed throughout time, these seemed to be more refined and imperceptible, because the cruel reprimands were often understood as the insertion of students in the culture which was considered legitimate. It turns out that some of them made the students perceive themselves as animals before the attitudes of the teachers. In one of the remarkable passages of the book, Stephen, the little boy I referred to earlier, made faces in front of the mirror and, for this reason, was aggressively dragged by the teacher just because he liked to see his own image reflected. Seeing him crouched in a corner and looking sad and lost, Kozol went to him and said:

if you curl up like that and will not even look up at me, it will just seem as if you wanted to make me think you were a little rat.

He looked down at himself hurriedly and then he looked up at me and he chuckled grotesquely and he said, with a pitiful little laugh:

- I know I couldn't be a rat, Mr. Kozol, because a rat has got to have a little tail!!

I never forgot that and I told it later to a child psychiatrist, whose answer to me made it more explicit and more dear:

- It is the absence of a tail which convinces him that he has not yet become a rat.

Perhaps that is overly absolute and smacks a bit of the psychiatric dogmatism that seems so difficult to accept because it leaves so little room for uncertainty or doubt; yet in this one instance I do not really think that it carries the point too far. For it is the Boston schoolteachers themselves who for years have been speaking of the

Negro children in their charge as "animals" and the school building that houses them as "a zoo". (op. cit., p. 23-24).

Such violence helped the boy to institute images about himself. His body seemed to assimilate and evidence his position of inferiority. Stephen "looked at the floor. He wouldn't look up. He wouldn't let his eyes depart from one chosen spot. His elbows froze at his sides." (op. cit., p.30). It is difficult to know whether it was the physical or the symbolic violence which caused the greatest harm to individuals. However, it is pertinent to discuss the effects of such actions shaped by pre-established patterns of conduct capable of instituting certain representations. In this regard, the notes of Norbert Elias (2010) are suggestive because, according to the author, becoming an adult in our society requires a high degree of self-regulating control of drives and affections. However, by nature humans do not have more than the biological potential to carry out these regulations; they have a biological device that makes the control of such drives possible. The model of this control is not given by nature, it develops during the growth of the child, inside and through relationships with others, with the school having an important role in shaping behaviors. The way teachers refer to their students, how they correct or reprimand them for their behavior contribute to this modeling. To this end, the teachers make use of a series of unspoken criteria that take into account not only, but also the physical appearance, which is always socially marked by aspects such as, for example, skin color or ways of behaving or to dress. There is, then, a certain subjectivity that accompanies the perception and judgments of teachers in relation to their students, organizing themselves around oppositions among the characteristics considered desirable, adequate, and valued and those that are not. The result of this is that students, without knowing it, are judged according to social rather than pedagogical classifications (CATANI; GALLEGO, 2009). According to Morales (2003), some elements such as ethnic origin, group of origin, physical appearance, sex, among others, end up influencing the expectations of the teachers, defining the type of behavior they will provide to their students: cordiality, praise, criticism and, in the case of the experiences reported by Kozol, also physical aggressions.

The judgements of the teachers are often transmuted into school euphemisms, making appreciations based on social criteria not perceptible and not understood as such. It is believed that the judgment refers to the "person" or "intelligence" and never to the social or racial person (BOURDIEU, 2014, p. 221). Produced by the practice of successive generations, and under certain conditions of existence, the perception schemes that teachers build about the world function as practical operators through which individuals act unconsciously and tend to reproduce reality. Thus, the judgement of the teacher is based on diffuse and never completely explained criteria, taking into account both the schoolwork and exercises, as well as the individual of their author (BOURDIEU, 1989). Among students, there are those who are more apt to meet the requests made and therefore live the school experience more comfortably, while there are those who feel unable to meet them and start to perceive themselves as being inapt for studies, as if individuals were born with any kind of predisposition to it. According to Pierre Bourdieu (2019, p. 249), the possibilities that an individual has of being "intelligent" or of considering himself a laureate of a "gift" are closely linked to the conditions of access to cultural capital that allowed him to experience the school space in a calm and comfortable way. Dispositions, often acquired long before entering school, enable the responses expected by teachers to be given with a certain ease and confidence, making us believe that those dispositions that had been cultivated for years in a non-systematical way are natural. The science, especially Psychology, legitimizes this process while seeking to measure the level of intelligence of individuals, disregarding the social history that precedes them.

Unfortunately, the book in question in this article deals with only one year of the life of Kozol as a teacher with those students. However, this does not prevent me from asking what consequences did the practices described by the author cause in the long term in the lives of the students? How would these boys and girls currently tell their school stories? What most marked them? Did this institution manage to permanently remove these children from school, making them believe in their inability to study? What are the marks and consequences left by the judgment made by the teachers to these students? I cannot answer the questions regarding the lives presented by the author. However, some authors have already dealt with the subject. I turn to some of them at this moment to establish the reflection.

### **“I want to be an intelligent woman”**

In the 1990s, Maria Helena Souza Patto published the classic study *A produção do fracasso escolar: histórias de submissão e rebeldia*<sup>4</sup>. In it, the author followed the school routine of four students considered “trouble students”, Ângela and Nailton were two of them. More than two decades later, Amaral (2010) searched for the adults that those children of the past had become and found them residing in the same location. The master’s dissertation written by her and entitled *Histórias de (re) provação escolar: vinte e cinco anos depois*<sup>5</sup> brings the testimonies of these two who had had tortuous experiences of schooling. Ângela was seen as a “poor” student; Nailton as “undisciplined”, both heard daily about how inadequate they were for the school. Their testimonies are remarkable because they allow us to observe stories of violence, both physical and psychological, which are very similar to those reported by Kozol when referring to the treatment given to students at the institution where he worked. In addition, they make it possible to understand the influences that such experiences had on the perception of both of them about their image and about the school. Regarding physical violence, when they looked back on their school years, both referred to a kind of “string” with which they were punished or had their movements restricted when they were undisciplined or did not perform as desired:

Ângela says: “I remember teacher Grace that she... For example, I think I was messing up, I don't know. I would get out of the chair a lot and stay there. Then she took it and tied me. She tied me with the string, you know, 'you'll have to do your work!’” (op. cit., p. 92).

Nailton says: “She [the teacher] had a string and a bamboo wand. She really hit us, but there was no way. When you... There's nothing left to say, a leopard can't change its spots, there's no way. If you are born spotted, you die spotted, there's no way. For that kind of thing, it... It was wasted time, poor thing.” (op. cit., p. 141).

The excerpts above are shocking because they show that physical violence was commonplace in the institution. However, the most striking memories, and perhaps the most painful ones, seem to be the ones that evidenced the pejorative ideas that their teachers made of them, as they had the strength to structure the perception that they constituted about their intellectuality in the long run. Ângela, at the age of 32 at the time of the development of the dissertation of Amaral (2010, p. 96), calls herself “an intelligent woman” but, sometimes,

<sup>4</sup>The production of school disapproval: stories of submission and rebellion, in free translation.

<sup>5</sup>Stories of school (dis) approval: twenty-five years later, in free translation.

during her speech, she refers to this attribute as something yet to be conquered, launching into the future the possibility of being so. The alternation in her answers between *being* and *wanting to be* makes the researcher ask her about how she saw herself at that moment. The answer suggests that the fact that she had not studied and became a “simple housewife” made her feel “humiliated” and “mistreated” (TRENTO; AMARAL, 2010).

### **“Ah, once labeled, there’s no turning back”**

The sentence above was said by Nailton, also as an adult, to describe the weight that the stigmatization and marginalization experienced at school caused to him. The statement made suggests the weight that the perceptions of the teachers about him, substantiated in the adjectives used to (dis)qualify him, had in his school career when his family was convinced that there was a need to medicate him because he had some disorder. In this regard, he says:

“Once you name it, there’s no turning back. Once it’s caught, the person puts that in the head. We was really “terrible”, that was true, we really went to school to mess up. We was “terrible”. [...] So, you call a name for the person is a certain way, and suddenly people look at you that way” (op. cit., p.119).

And he complements:

“Ah, once labeled, there’s no turning back. It seems like every teacher gets you that way. Some of them talked about ‘how he is with me, and he is this or that’. Sometimes a teacher was absent, they sent a teacher and she said ‘he was like this or that’ but they didn’t say that the others did the same, but that’s it... Once labeled, there’s no turning back” (op. cit., p. 119).

“Those who received it from others, interpret it to be that terrible, but it's not quite like that. That I didn't like school, that's true” (op. cit., p.119).

The good and bad expectations that teachers have in relation to their students help to determine their behavior and school performance, functioning as a “prophecy” that is “self-fulfilling” and helping to structure the relationships that students have with the school and with knowledge (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1989). Nailton seems to be aware of the consequences that the view presented about him caused for his self-image. However, he refers to “doing well at school” as an innate characteristic when he says that “[...] when a person must be, there is no way. He's born that way. I was not good at studying at all. School wasn't my strength. That was the real thing” (AMARAL; TRENTO, 2015, p.422). And, thus, he justifies his failures at the institution by resorting to the idea that there are those who are naturally more apt to occupy this space, as if this capacity was the result of a “gift” and not of class differences that were transformed into differences in intelligence (BOURDIEU, 1983). Eventually, the experience of processes of violence certainly contributed to the outcome of his history of relationships with the school. Under these conditions, there were more obstacles than incentives to learning (AMARAL; TRENTO 2015). Just as there were many more obstacles for the children at the school in Boston, victimized by several absurdities like this one:



“- The child's not in his right mind.”

I asked her, when she said this, if she had thought of helping him into any kind of treatment. This was a mistake, however, for it developed that the Math Teacher was not at all keen about psychiatry. When I asked about treatment for Stephen, she answered only that she had not thought of it but that, now that I mentioned it, she was going to have to admit that she could not go along. When I asked her why, her answer to me was that "he would just lie and tell the psychiatrists that we weren't kind to him. He'd tell them that we were all prejudiced up here." Within days, Stephen was sent to the cellar for another rattanning and the comment of the Math Teacher, with no sense of incongruity or injustice, was, again, that he was "not in his right mind." (KOZOL, 1983, p.29).

The excerpt above reveals a kind of orchestration of violence. Stephen was attacked for his behavior, which was considered inappropriate, at the same time that he assimilated, based on the speeches of the teachers about him, to be a “[...] boy [who] is not in his right mind”.

### **“The books did not refer to them. What did refer to them was obvious...”**

As stated previously, the cruelty towards the students in Boston was not restricted to physical aggression and oral reprimands related to their behavior and appearance. The way school contents were transmitted was an initiative to erase the references of their ancestors. Instead, white people references were offered. When textbooks reported anything about the black population, they did it in a completely stereotyped or submissive way. According to Kozol (1983), there was a lot in the official curriculum of the City of Boston to support these materials, as well as the behavior of teachers towards students. On one occasion, already tired of witnessing so many absurdities, he tries to show his indignation to his colleagues. The excerpt below refers to the episode that provoked his reaction:

Something similar to this, though it was not in a printed textbook, was a mimeographed test about American history that the Fourth Grade teachers at my school had been using for several years. The test listed a number of attributes and qualities that were supposed to have been associated with George Washington: "courageous, rich, intelligent, wise, handsome, kind, good in sports, patient, believed in God, sense of humor, dressed in style, rode a horse well." From these the class were asked to underline the things that made George Washington "a great leader." The answers that would get points were only the noble virtues. "Rich," "handsome," "dressed in style," "rode a horse well" and "good in sports" were wrong. It was, I felt, not really a lesson on George Washington but a force-feeding of a particular kind of morality:

THESE ARE GOOD QUALITIES

GEORGE WASHINGTON GOT SOMEPLACE

THESE MUST BE THE THINGS THAT MADE HIM GREAT (op. cit., p. 84, author's upper case).

The indignation of the author at what happened is because the correct answers to the test had not been taken from any study on George Washington, but “from somebody’s cupboard of good qualities (“moral builders”, p. 84)”. Furthermore, by omitting all the advantages that had

placed the former president in the position he occupied, the children were offered the false idea that it was enough to cultivate the same virtues to become president of the United States, when the only way to reach occupying such a position would result from the knowledge of the obstacles caused by their position of social, racial and educational disadvantage compared to his. When presenting this argument to the reading teacher, Kozol (1983) heard that “We are not going to start teaching cynicism here in the Fourth Grade” (op. cit., p.86). This understanding supported her initiative to distort the contents or even to omit them from the students.

The curriculum of the City of Boston endorsed the development of absurd practices such as the one explained above. When dealing with the different ways of planning the teaching practice, Philippe Perrenoud (1995) presents the understanding that there is a *formal curriculum* where the general contents to be developed with the students are foreseen; there is the *real curriculum* which is never the strict realization of what is planned by the institution and the teachers because it partially escapes their control; and there is a *hidden curriculum*, which escapes precise formulation by taking the place of the unsaid. Some learning is in accordance with what is prescribed in the formal curriculum (which in the case of the school in Boston was not very helpful), but others, even though they went practically unnoticed, structure certain ways of thinking. In schooled societies, thought systems can only be understood by taking into account the school system that is capable of building certain habits of thought in a generation and some kinds of common sense on certain themes. The pejorative representations about the black population that were present in the attitudes of the teachers, as well as in the ways of portraying them in the books used by children, seemed to be common sense. In fact, what caused discomfort among the teachers and the directors in the institution were the attitudes of Kozol and not the others. The books followed the same oppressive perspectives observed daily by the author. So, even when the materials offered by the government to schools sought to highlight other aspects, they ended up reaffirming the position of inferiority in which this population had been placed. Exemplary fragments of this statement can be seen in the excerpt below, from the book *Our world today*. According to Kozol (1983), practically all the books that children had access to were similar to it:

Again, as with the social studies books, when the editor of one of these readers went out of his way to find something that would have to do with Negroes, it tended to be embarrassing and awkward. One instance of this was a story called “Tou Never Can Tell”. The story seems memorable because, as far as I can recall, it is the only story in any storybook on any shelf that I ever saw within my school in which an American Negro child was described. The problem about the story was that it could not present the child in anything but a slavish, superstitious and pathetic-comic light. The Negroes were described not with malice but with condescension as the funny, sad and sweet little wandering attendants to a supercilious, incredibly distant but also unexpectedly generous white lord (op. cit., p.89).

The people of the British Isles are, like our own, a mixed people. Their ancestors were the sturdy races of northern Europe, such as Celts, Angles, Saxons, Danes, and Normans, whose energy and abilities still appear in their descendants. With such a splendid inheritance what could be more natural than that the British should explore and settle many parts of the world, and, in time, build up the world's greatest colonial empire? (op. cit., p. 83)

Africa needs more capitalists . . . White managers are needed ... to show the Negroes how to work and to manage the plantations... (op.cit., p.84).

The white man may remain for short periods and direct the work, but he cannot ... do the work himself. He must depend upon the natives to do the work (op. cit., p. 84).

This other excerpt refers to a fragment of the storybook read to the children:

There was another problem in the basic readers. This was the old and obvious one of inherited tales of time-worn prejudice.

“Once upon a time there was a woman who had two daughters. One of them was beautiful, but the other one was ugly”.

When you read this, you may look up at the illustration on the top of the page but you know, even before you look, which daughter is going to have yellow hair and which one will have dark hair. The dark-skinned girl, the bad one, also has pimples or some kind of coal-smudge beneath her nose, along her cheek and on her jaw. In the story each of these daughters goes for a visit under the ground to stay with a mysterious lady. Each behaves according to her kind. The good daughter behaves nicely, works hard, and receives as her reward a rain of gold coins. The other daughter behaves poorly, refuses to do any work, is selfish, wants something for nothing, and receives as her punishment a shower of black tar. "The tar did not come off the girl until she stopped being lazy," the author tells us. "And it was a long time before she learned that lesson" (op. cit., p.88-89).

The initiative of trying to offer different references to the students cost the teacher/author several ailments with the School Committee of the city and with the teachers of the institution where he worked as a substitute. His indignation was nourished by the hope of trying to change the daily school life of the students, at least during the classes for which he was responsible, when the education of those children was his responsibility. He once brought to the classroom a biography of Martin Luther King that was read by some children and their mothers, who, excited about reading it, asked about the possibility of having copies to give to their family or friends as a Christmas present. When verifying the motivation and curiosity of children for reading and suggesting that more students could access it, Kozol (1983) was warned by the reading teacher:

first that they [the books] were too difficult for most of the pupils (this was not the truth), and then, only latterly, that they were about people who were Negro.

- I wouldn't mind using them - was the way she finally said it to me - if these were all Negro children in your room. But it would not be fair to the white children in the class to force such books on them too. We do not have all Negroes. If we did, it would be different. I could see using them if this were a segregated school. But it isn't. We have white children. As matters stand it simply would not be right or fair (op. cit., p. 91).

The persistence of the teacher in presenting other references to his students and the pleasure they showed when they got to know them ended up resulting in his dismissal at the end of that school year. But before that, his accusations moved the institution and the

School Committee of the city, arousing the indignation of the families of the students. The students and their parents were very sad and indignant with the dismissal of teacher Kozol, unlike their professional colleagues who did not hide their satisfaction for what had happened. Apparently, the understandings of the Reading teacher were shared by practically everyone who worked there. After the resignation, Jonathan Kozol restarted his professional career elsewhere. According to Freire (2015), he became an important educator in the United States, as his biography also suggests. We have no way of knowing the fate of his students between 1964 and 1965 in the City of Boston.

### Final considerations

*Death at an early age* was an unforgettable book for me and in this article I could not write about any other work than that. Whenever I can, I refer to it in the classes of the disciplines I teach at the undergraduate level, especially in those which deal with assessment and all the subjectivity involved in the judgments that teachers make of their students. With the memories of that school year, Kozol denounced the arbitrary and abusive practices of his professional colleagues. These denunciations played an important role in questioning the North American public school at the time of its publication. However, more than fifty years later, the book still has many elements to be explored, especially those that refer to the description of practices developed by teachers when transmitting knowledge to students and teaching them ways to relate to knowledge and culture. The possibilities for reflection brought by his work are rich and diverse. It is clear that we still have a lot to discuss about the minutiae involving teaching work in schools and that readings like that give us important contributions in this regard.

In the pages of the book, we are confronted with various types of violence and injustices committed by an exclusionary school system which daily showed students their inadequacy in the face of the expectations of the teachers. Such expectations seemed to be insurmountable regardless of the efforts made, for at the root of it all were racial and social issues. Both the physical aggressions practiced, and the derogatory speeches given by the teachers fulfilled the function of punishing children for this. The practices developed by the teachers converted into school truth what was actually supported by a social judgment and, thus, the “spiritual and psychological murder” of children took place, as stated by Robert Coles in the preface of the book (p.11).

The fertility of questions and reflections raised from the reading of this teaching autobiography highlights the potential that literary works have when used as a resource for the development of educational possibilities. Insofar, as they allow knowledge of the social, historical and psychological reality, they offer us useful elements for thinking about pedagogical training, practice and relations.

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