

## **The multiple facets of early literacy in the work of Magda Soares: contributions to research, pedagogical practice, and public policies**<sup>\*1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

This essay aims to discuss the concept of early literacy in Magda Soares's work, nearly 40 years after the publication of her article *The multiple facets of early Literacy*. We believe that in her books and papers, the author deepens her contribution to early literacy research, consolidating the concept developed over more than five decades of publication in the field. We based our work on a careful reading of all her books published between 1986 and 2020, as well as three papers produced between 1980 and 1995. We conclude by indicating that the germ of the concepts of early literacy and literacy can be seen in the article *The multiple facets of early Literacy*, where the author warned for almost 40 years about the need to view early literacy from different epistemological lenses and not only pedagogical ones. Indeed, the development of a pedagogy of early literacy is the result of a clear epistemological stance and a political commitment to the country's illiteracy situation, two defining elements in Soares's career. Her commitment to public schools and the political dimension of early literacy is a legacy that should nourish the formation of literacy teachers and public early literacy policies, not only for children but also for young people, adults, and the elderly.

### **Keywords**

Early literacy – Magda Soares – Literacy.

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\* English version by Ramon Antunez de Lima. The author take full responsibility for the translation of the text, including titles of books/articles and the quotations originally published in Portuguese.

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## Introduction

The field of early literacy in Brazil has been undergoing profound changes since the early 1980's, when the questioning of traditional early literacy methods and their underlying concepts began to come up systematically, from different theoretical-methodological perspectives. The publication of Magda Soares's article, *The multiple facets of early Literacy*, in 1985, is a landmark, a seminal text that changed the way education scholars had previously considered children's early literacy until then. In this article, the author outlines the theoretical and epistemological foundations that influenced her understanding of early literacy - ten years before the emergence of the concept of literacy - a concept that would revolutionize the field of early literacy research, and she herself is the leading exponent of such studies in Brazil. This same article was republished as a chapter in the book *Early Literacy and Literacy*, in 2004, in which Soares brought together texts considered a reference for his thinking on literacy between 1985 and 1998.

Magda Soares dedicated her academic life to early literacy research, contributing decisively to the foundation of this field, always articulating reflections on research, pedagogical practice, and public policies. She was not an armchair researcher, on the contrary, her concerns about literacy failure focused primarily on the most outcast: children from lower-class backgrounds, who systematically failed (and still fail) in the process of learning to read and write. In a Bourdieu-like fashion, we can say that Soares viewed early literacy research as a "combat sport"<sup>3</sup>. Her contributions crossed the boundaries of the academic field, influencing pedagogical practices and public policies.

This essay-article aims to discuss the concept of early literacy in Magda Soares's work, nearly 40 years after the publication of her article *The multiple facets of early Literacy*, a seminal work that highlights the social perspective Magda Soares drew on in her discussion of education, school, and early literacy. In addition to the article *The multiple facets of early Literacy*, we take as reference all of her published books on this topic, and most emphatically, her first, *Language and School*, from 1986, for its innovative contribution to the discussion of the relationship between language and school exclusion, a debate still very relevant today (Macedo, 2023).

We believe that in subsequent books the author deepens her contribution to literacy research, consolidating the conception built over more than four decades of publication in the area, in which we observe different ways of expressing the concept of literacy as her research advances.

From a methodological standpoint, in the conceiving of this essay, we treat the reading of the author's texts as a process construction of meaning, not mere decoding. Since language and reading are processes of verbal interaction (Bakhtin [Volochinov], 1995), it is up to the reader to produce inferences by activating their prior knowledge in relation to the text, producing meaning in the process of comprehension. All of Magda Soares' books were read throughout the last four decades. For this analysis, they were reread in chronological order to conceptually map the literacy concept presented in each text, establishing contrasts to indicate changes over time. Considering the need for a

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**3-** For more on Bourdieu's analogy, see Charles (2002).

systematic analytical reading, I used previously mapped strategies common to readers of academic texts, including notes with questions, emphasis, and excerpts, conceptual mapping, seeking to identify the concepts in each text and their relationships with other concepts, and annotations of specific chapters. Only the 1985 article was read on screen, as the printed magazine is no longer available. The others were read in printed form, which allowed me to discuss notes from previous readings, review interpretations, and establish a dialogic relationship with my own process of reading and understanding Soares's work.

This essay is organized into four sections, in addition to this introduction and concluding remarks. In the first section, we present the initial formulation of the concept of early literacy as a multifaceted phenomenon and the references with which the author engages. In the second section, we will address the social perspective from which Soares views education and language, already announced in the 1985 article *The multiple facets of early Literacy* and explored in depth in *Language and School*, a book published the following year. In the third section, we explore the changes that occurred in the conceptualization of early literacy as a result of the arrival of the concept of literacy in Brazil, discussed in the book *Literacy: a theme in three genres*. In the fourth section, we present the contributions of the reconceptualization of the facets of early literacy presented in the book *Literacy: the matter of methods*. We conclude by presenting Soares's contributions to research, pedagogical practice, and public policies.

## Early Literacy as a multifaceted phenomenon

Magda Soares's text, *The multiple facets of early Literacy*, published in 1985, may be considered the first article to significantly impact the development of the concept of early literacy in Brazil and the first text in which she clearly presents her conception of early literacy. Her objective in this article is to discuss early literacy from three categories: the concept, the nature of the process, and its determinants. She begins the text by recognizing the development of the mother tongue (oral and written) as a permanent learning process. The author differentiates the process of acquiring written language from the process of developing the mother tongue and questions the pedagogical and etymological relevance of attributing this permanent, uninterrupted process of developing the mother tongue (oral and written) to early literacy, arguing the need to consider its specificities:

[...] early literacy in its proper, specific sense: process of acquiring the written code, reading and writing skills [...] In its full sense, early literacy should lead to learning not a mere translation from oral to written, and vice-versa, but to learning a peculiar and often idiosyncratic phoneme-grapheme relationship of another code, which has, in relation to the oral code, morphological and syntactic specificity (Soares, 1985, p. 20-21).

In this conceptualization, the author presents the linguistic facet that would later become the subject of further studies in the book *Early Literacy: the matter of methods* (Soares, 2016), published 31 years later. At that point, the use of the word *code* to refer to the AWS (Alphabetic Writing System) is observed, a name that changed in her later

works, especially after the arrival of the concept of early literacy in Brazil and after her more in-depth contact with the texts of Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky in the 1990's.

The linguistic aspect, according to the author, is more focused on the individual than the social dimension of early literacy, dimensions she presents in the article in the form of a question and reviews in depth in the third chapter of the book *Literacy: a theme in three genres* (Soares, 1998a), published a decade later. She considers that early literacy varies in its conception depending on the contexts in which it occurs and the needs of each social group - she argues that "the concept of early literacy depends on cultural, economic, and technological characteristics" (Soares, 1985, p. 21) - and concludes that the concept portrays not a skill but a set of skills, which characterizes it as a "phenomenon of complex, multifaceted nature" (p. 21). She states that the concept has been studied by researchers from different fields, but without any articulation among them. Soares names the psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, psychological, and linguistic facets as those that constitute the concept of early literacy. Decades later, she presents and discusses new facets of early literacy, such as in the 2004 book *Early Literacy and Literacy* and in the 2016 Jabuti Award-winning work *Early Literacy: the matter of methods*.

In the year the article *The multiple facets of early Literacy* was published, contributions from the psychogenesis of written language, a seminal study by Ferreiro and Teberosky (1985), were published in Brazil, which would revolutionize the field of early literacy. Magda Soares, in tune with leading researchers, had already mentioned the authors' perspective on early literacy research in her article dated from the same year, however, lacking on in-depth analysis or even discussion. The psychogenesis of written language began to influence Soares's conception in publications in the last two decades, notably in the books *Early Literacy: the matter of methods* (2016) and *Alfaletrar* (2020). There is no criticism towards Ferreiro and Teberosky's (1985) work in Soares's texts; on the contrary, their dialogue indicates an appropriation of the psycholinguistic theses of the psychogenesis of written language as a way of expanding the understanding of the processes of writing by children. This framework would later be used systematically in the organization of early literacy pedagogical plan in the city of Lagoa Santa in Minas Gerais (MG, Brazil), with which she had collaborated for more than a decade after her retirement, turning this experience into a research laboratory, leading to the publication of *Alfaletrar* (Soares, 2020).

When briefly describing each facet in the 1985 article, we observe that the author focuses more on the sociolinguistic aspect, which would be further explored in the book *Language and school a social perspective*, published the following year, in 1986.

The sociolinguistic aspect is discussed from the perspective of the social uses of language in close relation to what the author called "dialect problems". It explores the relationship between a child's spoken language and the dialect and the spoken language the school expects them to speak. The distance between a child's dialect and the standard language applied in school is the key to understanding the failure of the working classes, an argument explored in depth in the publication *Language and school: a social perspective*. Soares argues that school failure cannot be explained solely by the complexity of the process. She revisits the sociological theories that at the time explained the failure of the

lower classes in school, especially those developed by sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Passeron, with the observation that “the school values written language and censors spontaneous spoken language that deviates too much from the first one; [...] children from privileged classes, due to their living conditions, adapt more easily to school expectations” (Soares, 1994 [1986], p. 23).

Based on Paulo Freire, Soares states that the problem of early literacy is not restricted to what these different disciplines point out (Psychology, Sociolinguistics, Linguistics, Psycholinguistics), it is necessary to go further and include the political dimension of this phenomenon. The school acts as if early literacy was a neutral process, just the teaching of an instrument, when in fact early literacy “is a form of thought, a process of building knowledge and a means of conquering political power” (Soares, 1994 [1986], p. 23).

She concludes by pointing out the need to understand that “the complex and multifaceted nature of early literacy and its cultural, social, and political determinants have important impacts on early literacy methods and its teaching materials” (Soares, 1994 [1986], p. 23). She argues that early literacy teacher’s formation is specific and should prepare them to understand the facets that constitute literacy and its determinants. In the next section, we will explore Soares’ thinking regarding the debate on the relationship between language and school and how this debate affects the concept of early literacy.

## **The social and political dimension of early literacy through the lens of *Language and school***

It is in her book *Language and school*, published in 1986, that Soares presents her social conception of language in depth, discussing the relationship between the language of the working classes and their academic failure. She argues that schools are poorly equipped to deal with the dialectal differences observed in the speech of working-class children. The conflict between standard language or the educated norm and the children’s dialectal variations, which guides pedagogical practice in schools, is, in fact, a social conflict inherent in a class-stratified society:

This conflict can only be understood from a social perspective: it is the Sociology that, by analyzing the material and symbolic power relations that determine a society stratified into classes, reveals the ideological assumptions behind the failure of the lower classes at school, which is, in fact, a failure of the school (Soares, 1994 [1986], p. 6).

Soares (1994 [1986]) observes that the school still does not understand Sociolinguistic differences and variations because it only considers language as the one produced by the dominant classes, the standard language spoken by children from the middle and upper classes. Just like language, poverty continues to be pathologized; the way of speaking of the lower classes continues to be an outside phenomenon, a deviation, something to be combated and corrected through the teaching of reading and writing and throughout the schooling process.

Using highly influential sociolinguistic and sociological theories produced by William Labov, Basil Bernstein, and Pierre Bourdieu, Magda Soares deconstructs the ideology of gift and the ideology of cultural deficiency, epistemologies in force at the time that guided pedagogical practices in education as a whole, which proposed compensatory education as a political-pedagogical practice. They had in common the responsibility of children and their culture for academic failure. “The function of the school, according to the ideology of the gift, would therefore be to adapt and adjust students to society, according to their individual aptitudes and characteristics” (Soares, 1994 [1986], p. 11). And she proceeds in her sociological critique: “It is obvious that such a conception does not withstand the most basic social, political, or economic analysis. In capitalist societies, class division is the result not of the characteristics of individuals, but of the division of labor” (p. 12).

Based specifically on *The reproduction: elements for a theory of the education system*, published by Bourdieu and Passeron in the 1970’s and translated into Brazilian Portuguese in 1975, Soares observes that “the school leads students from the lower classes to recognize that there is a legitimate way of speaking and writing, different from the one they master, but it does not lead them to understand this way of speaking and writing, that is, to understand how to produce and consume it” (Soares, 1994 [1986], p. 63). In other words, children recognize the standard language as the appropriate and accepted language in school, but the way the school teaches them is by denying dialectal variations, that is, by denying the very language of the children who fail. The deterministic view of the theory of academically profitable linguistic capital, defended by Bourdieu and Passeron (1970), ignores the possibility of transforming the vicious cycle of academic failure among children from the lower classes. Based on Paulo Freire (1974), Soares discusses this determinism, beginning to notice a gap in the social function of schools beyond reproduction. Since schools are part of society, they are also constituted by the same contradictions and antagonisms:

[...] at school, a mirror of society, these same antagonisms and contradictions are presented, and that is why, although it cannot be a redeemer, it is also not powerless: the antagonisms lead it to be [...] a space for the action of progressive forces, that is, forces that push towards social transformation, through the overcoming of social inequalities” (Soares, 1994 [1986], p. 73).

Soares’ proposal in *Language and school* is to discuss the social dimension of language, pointing out the limits of school and its responsibility for the failure of those who most need schooling, establishing a critical view of pedagogical processes, denouncing how the schooling process itself tends to blame them. We can consider that the sociological view of the teaching of reading and writing in schools is well established by the author and becomes a basis for formulating the concept of literacy throughout her work.

Soares states that the social role of the school, committed to the fight against social inequalities, “is to revitalize and properly direct the progressive forces within it and guarantee the lower classes the acquisition of knowledge and skills that will equip them to participate in the process of social transformation” (Soares, 1994 [1986], p. 73). She concludes by stating, “Teaching through language and teaching language are not



only technical but also political tasks”, highlighting the political dimension present in the concept of literacy in dialogue with Paulo Freire.

*Language and school* began to guide initial and continuing teacher training, becoming a reference for decades. It was republished in 2017, indicating that the author herself recognized this work as an important foundation for her understanding of the relationships between language, school, and literacy. In the next section, we will discuss the impact of the concept of literacy on Soares’s work, which was published 12 years after *Language and School*.

### **The impact of the concept of literacy on Soares’ definition of early Literacy**

Only 12 years after *Language and school*, the author published another book, bringing together texts written in the 1990’s: *Literacy: a theme in three genres*, published in 1998. In this book, the researcher presents a discussion and definition of the concept of literacy in relation to the concept of early literacy. The term literacy initially appears in a publication by Mary Kato (1986), but without any conceptualization. In 1988, in the book *Illiterate adults: the opposite of the opposite*, Leda Verdiani Tfouni introduces the concept and distinguishes it from the concept of early literacy, as does Angela Kleiman in her work published in 1995. Soares believes that it was in Tfouni’s publication that literacy gained the status of a technical term in the fields of Education and Linguistic Sciences. This term was translated by the neologism *letramento*.

Although she was not the first author to publish about literacy in Brazil, Soares’ concept, presented in 1998, ten years after Tfouni’s book, became the leading reference in education and early literacy research in Brazil, as seen on Google Scholar, with nearly 8,000 citations. It is Magda Soares’ work most cited by researchers, followed by the article *Literacy and early Literacy: their multiple facets* published in 2004 by the Brazilian Journal of Education (Soares, 2004b).

Since then, Soares made an effort to distinguish literacy from early literacy, preserving the specificities of early literacy, an element she drew attention to in her 1985 article, *The multiple facets of early Literacy*. The author began to conceptualize early literacy by always establishing an interdependent relationship with the concept of literacy, a process inevitable due to the influence of this concept among researchers, public policies and pedagogical practices that began in the late 1990’s. It was in this work that she coined the concept of literacy and presented the perspective of “teaching early literacy through literacy” perspective:

EARLY LITERACY: act of teaching/learning to read and write.

LITERACY: state or condition of someone who not only knows how to read and write, but cultivates and exercises social practices that use writing (Soares, 1998a, p. 47, *author’s emphasis*).

It is worth noticing that, for Soares, early literacy is synonymous of literacy, a concept that appears in her texts in the 1990’s, such as in the article *Written language, society and*

*culture: relations, dimensions and perspectives*, published in 1995 by the *Brazilian Journal of Education*, of the National Association of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Education (ANPED). Early literacy is defined in the same perspective as literacy, as “the state” or “condition” assumed by those who have learned to read and write, and is constituted by the individual and social dimensions, explored in depth in this article (Soares, 1995). The conception of literacy/early literacy highlights the complexity of the concept and the choice of the conceptual expression “alfabetizar letrando” (teaching early literacy through literacy), which has been used in her publications since 1998. In her words:

[...] Thus, we would have *early literacy* and *literacy* as two distinct actions, but not inseparable, on the contrary: the ideal would be to *teach early literacy through literacy*, that is: to teach how to read and write in the context of the social practices of reading and writing, so that the individual becomes, at the same time, *early-literate* and *literate* (Soares, 1998a, p. 47, *author’s emphasis*).

The first two chapters of the book are devoted to these conceptual definitions, contrasting them with previously well-known definitions, including illiteracy, literate, illiterate, and the lesser-known *alphabetism*. Soares also explores how literacy is defined in European countries and the United States. However, it is in the final chapter that the author presents in depth the complexity of the concept of literacy, still little discussed in Brazil, highlighting the individual and social dimensions of this process. The text was first written in English under request of Unesco<sup>4</sup>, translated into Portuguese for the book, the central issue is the definition, assessment, and measurement of literacy, a requirement addressed by UNESCO itself by defining literacy policies around the world. In this chapter, unlike the first two, literacy is translated as almost synonymous with early literacy, likely because it was originally written in English, a language in which there is no distinction between these concepts, as can be seen in the excerpts below:

[...] hence the term *functional literacy* (or *functional early literacy* [alphabetization]) (Soares, 1998a, p. 72, *author’s emphasis*);

[...] *non-literacy* (illiteracy [anphalbetism]) is the main problem, not literacy. (Soares, 1998a, p. 87, *author’s emphasis*).

[...] the assessment tools cannot fail to determine a dividing point in the literacy continuum that distinguishes literate or well-read people from early illiterate or illiterate people [unable to read], and cannot fail to use the misleading dichotomy “literate”, “well-read”, versus “illiterate” [unable to read], (Soares, 1998a, p. 89).

The author concludes that literacy is a concept with multiple meanings, and its definition depends heavily on the social, historical, cultural, political, and ideological context, signifying quite distinct processes in each context. The complexity increases when the goal is to measure and evaluate literacy levels in a society. Since then, Soares began

**4-** “Monograph prepared at the request of the Statistics Section of UNESCO, in Paris, published in English in March 1992, with the title “Literacy Assessment and its implications for Statistical Measurement”, translated into French and Spanish; here the translation into Portuguese is presented for the first time” (Soares, 1998, p. 61).”.



to present and discuss early literacy from a literacy perspective. This conceptualization, alongside the discussion of its multiple facets, became hegemonic and began to support the teaching practice, early literacy research, and public policies in Brazil. In 2019, the concept was rejected by the Bolsonaro government, and the author was the target of attacks from those who ran the Ministry of Education until 2022.

The debate of early literacy, poorly shared in Brazil, returns to the surface in the republication of the article *Written language, society and culture: relations, dimensions and perspectives* (Soares, 1995), as a chapter of the book *Early literacy and literacy*, from 2004. It can be noticed that the concept is truly synonymous with literacy and expresses in depth Soares' thoughts on literacy even before the concept landed in Brazil and being addressed by her in 1998. We may state that the text written for UNESCO and this article, now a chapter, presents the conceptual genesis of literacy, since all the nuances of the concept were explored before 1998, when she first addressed literacy. Thus, we can affirm that, although she was not the first author to publish on literacy in Brazil, her ideas, as discussed in the early 1990's, reflected the concept, since Soares was well-versed in the international conceptual debate on literacy, as it can be seen in the references cited in her articles and in the syllabi and bibliographies of her graduate courses at the School of Education of the University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), where I was a student. Furthermore, the dialogue with Paulo Freire's concept of early literacy is present in all of her publications, demonstrating the importance of recognizing Freire's pioneering work and the originality of his conception of early literacy beyond the teaching of a neutral technique, of the phoneme-grapheme relationship, as it can be seen, especially, in the 1998 article *Paulo Freire and early literacy: much more than a method* (Soares, 1998b) and in the 1990 article written for UNESCO.

In this way, the concept of early literacy is redimensioned in the face of literacy and begins to name the specificities of learning the written language, the representation of the alphabetic-orthographic writing system, the mastery of writing technology, while literacy is the perspective with which early literacy should be treated and taught, that is, constituted by the uses and social functions that writing has in the society, uses that vary according to the context, social class, culture, among other dimensions.

## **Is early literacy a matter of method?**

The deliberation over literacy methods, which has always permeated the country's debate, was closely followed and discussed by Soares. In the article *Early literacy: in search of a method?*, published in 1990 and republished as a book chapter in 2004, Magda Soares questions the country's relentless search for a miraculous early literacy method, a poor view of the processes of teaching and learning written language, so prevalent in public policies and the educational debate to this day. The emergence of Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky's psychogenesis of written language (1985), which began to be published and spread in the country in the late 1980's, contributed decisively to this debate by revealing the nuances of children's writing learning, treating it as a conceptual issue. Their theory and writings denounce the flaws of traditional early literacy methods, whether

synthetic or analytical, as they rule out how children learn written language. From this same perspective, Soares (1990, 2004a) deepens the debate by drawing attention to the teleological dimension of education, which demands clear and well-defined objectives, planning of actions and procedures, and the definition of a conceptual paradigm that supports such choices. This is the orthodoxy of the school that reflects its own culture.

A central question of the article is “how to reconcile the principles of psychogenetic learning of reading and writing with these institutional conditions of school orthodoxy?” (Soares, 1990, p. 47). The author argues that a reconciliation should be sought between the paradigm of the psychogenesis of written language and the pedagogical need to have a clear methodological path to be followed in early literacy teaching and learning processes. Unlike Ferreiro and Teberosky, who, when questioning traditional early literacy methods, opt for the term *Proposal*, Soares continues to use the term *Method*, conceptualizing it based on an understanding of school culture and its teleological dimension.

Fifteen years after the publication of the article, Soares released the book *Early literacy: the matter of methods*, which became a major reference in the field of early literacy, having won the Jabuti Award in the Education and Pedagogy category. According to Soares, the work is the result of decades of reflection on early literacy and education, beginning with her “rite of passage” – as a young middle-class woman who began her professional life “teaching Portuguese” to children from the working classes. In this work, Soares delves deeply into international theories and research on written language acquisition, with an emphasis on linguistic theories aiming that these theories may be able to, articulately, guide the process of teaching and learning writing, a goal presented in the article *The multiple facets of early literacy*. In her words:

[...] the desire and hope is that this book will be able to reveal to the reader the possibility of articulation between theories and research results from various fields of knowledge on early literacy which, each focusing on the facet it privileges, may and should be associated in guiding a process of learning and teaching the written language in which the “multiple facets” act in an integrated manner: instead of a *early literacy method*, *early literacy with method*, as I propose in the last chapter (Soares, 2016, p. 12, *author’s emphasis*).

The author’s emphasis in the above statement clearly indicates two things: the choice to maintain the term *method*, redefining it from the perspective of “early literacy with method” rather than the traditional sense of an early literacy method; and the choice to systematize an understanding of early literacy, expanding the dialogue beyond the social and psychogenetic perspectives present in her work until then. A dialogue with cognitive theories of reading is observed, which could give rise to eventual contradiction or conflict with the social perspective that determined her conception of early literacy and literacy. However, we may understand that Soares’ proposal does not lose its social basis; it seeks to appropriate cognitive theories, articulating them with her conception of early literacy as a social practice.

Not only in this book, but also in published texts on the hegemonic presence of constructivism in Brazil, we encounter Soares’ concern with the impact of spontaneous

appropriations of the psychogenesis of written language by public school early literacy teachers, leading to the failure of early literacy among the lower classes. This position is expressed in the article *The reinvention of early literacy*, published in 2003 in the journal *Presença Pedagógica* (Soares, 2003). For Soares, the denial of the method in early literacy, stemming from a misunderstanding of Ferreiro and Teberosky's theory, was based on the mistaken view that simply exposing children to diverse texts is enough for them to appropriate written language and become literate. This misunderstanding was exacerbated, according to the author, by the strong emphasis that the concept of literacy came to have in pedagogical practices, whose predominant focus is on teaching genres and textual genres rather than on the alphabetic writing system. In her words:

In the early years of the 21st century, the discussion about methods in early literacy, relatively marginalized during the last two decades of the 20th century, reappears, and controversies are faced again, now more complex: not only divergences around different early literacy methods, but also, and perhaps above all, doubts about the possibility or necessity of a method for early literacy teaching - a movement to recover the method in conflict with the tendency towards demethodization, a consequence of the interpretation given to constructivism (Soares, 2016, p. 24).

Unlike the 1985 article (*The multiple facets of early literacy*), in this paper, Soares reformulates her way of presenting the facets of early literacy, summarizing them into three facets, derived from three specific objects of knowledge, defining them as follows:

We may take the *linguistic facet*, the object of knowledge is the appropriation of the alphabetic-orthographic system and writing conventions, an object that demands specific cognitive and linguistic processes and, therefore, the development of specific learning and, consequently, teaching strategies - in this book, *early literacy*. If the focus is on the *interactive facet*, the object is the skills of text comprehension and production, an object that requires other distinct cognitive and linguistic processes and other distinct learning and teaching strategies. If the focus is on the *sociocultural facet*, the object is the social and cultural events that involve writing, an object that implies specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes that promote appropriate insertion in these events, that is, in different situations and contexts of writing use (Soares, 2016, p. 29, *author's emphasis*).

The interconnection between early literacy and literacy may be seen in the conceptual definition above when, besides linguistic and cognitive knowledge of the alphabetic-orthographic system, knowledge of how writing functions in society, perceived through its interactive and sociocultural dimensions, must be considered equally important. Which highlights the conditions for producing reading and writing as the basis for teaching and understanding writing in all its complexity. Thus, Soares revisits the perspective of early literacy through literacy that has permeated her entire work since 1998:

[...] the initial learning of written language, although understood and treated as a multifaceted phenomenon, must be developed in its entirety, as a whole, because this is the real nature of the acts of reading and writing in which the complex interaction between the social practices of

written language and the one who reads or writes presupposes the simultaneous exercise of many and differentiated skills. This is what has been called early literacy through literacy (Soares, 2016, p. 35, *author's emphasis*).

As mentioned previously, Magda Soares put her early literacy theory into practice by volunteering for approximately fifteen years as an advisor to the Municipal Education System of Lagoa Santa, near Belo Horizonte. In this process, she explored the teleological dimension of education and schools, contributing to the training of teachers and administrators in early literacy planning and practice, based specially on the psychogenesis of written language and addressing the debate on the need to “teaching early literacy with method” and to teach early literacy through literacy.

As a result of this work, the book *Alfaletrar: every child can learn to read and write* (Soares, 2020) was published. In this book, Soares details, clearly and objectively, the process of organizing the political-pedagogical early literacy practice developed in the Municipal School System of Lagoa Santa, Minas Gerais. The work aims to support teachers and school administrators, enabling the creation of routines and practices focused on the three facets she addresses in *Early literacy: the matter of methods*. It can be said that the book portrays the Lagoa Santa experience, convincingly embodying Soares’ conceptualization of early literacy from a literacy perspective. Above all, the author highlights the principle that every child, without exception, is capable of becoming literate, providing a theoretical-methodological framework that demystifies the notion she challenges that children from lower-income backgrounds do not learn because their language skills are deficient.

## Final conclusions

We conclude this essay by revisiting the development of the concept of early literacy throughout Magda Soares’ work, highlighting in particular the article *The multiple facets of early literacy* and the books *Language and school* (1994 [1986]); *Literacy: a theme in three genres* (1998a); *Early literacy e literacy* (2004a); *Early literacy: the matter of the methods* (2016); and *Alfaletrar* (2020). Multiple facets of early literacy were raised and discussed by the author throughout her work; with each new publication, a new element emerged, deepening the debate and making the concept of literacy more complex. We believe that the concept of literacy was perhaps the one that most profoundly impacted the way Soares defined early literacy popularizing the expression that became hegemonic among educators and researchers in Brazil: teaching early literacy through literacy. Similarly, her work in schools, advising the Lagoa Santa Municipal School System (MG), was largely based on her appropriation of Ferreiro and Teberosky’s psychogenesis of written language, in conjunction with the theory of literacy as a social practice. Despite being an exceptional researcher, Soares sought to implement her ideas in political and pedagogical practice, testing theories and concepts, and building a literacy pedagogy consolidated in the work *Alfaletrar*.

However, the germ of the concepts of early literacy and literacy can be seen in the article *The multiple facets of early literacy*, when the author warned, 40 years ago, of the need to view early literacy through different epistemological lenses, not only pedagogical ones. Above all, Soares builds her legacy by engaging with different theories, seeking support for a deeper understanding of the multiple facets of early literacy. Nevertheless, even though these theories can be considered conflicting – for example, linguistic theories and the psychogenesis of written language, Paulo Freire’s theory of literacy, and the theory of literacy itself as a social practice – we believe that the author presents, in this dialogical stance, the need to confront the understanding of early literacy failure in dialogue with different scientific knowledge rather than seeking a single answer.

Indeed, the development of an early literacy pedagogy is the result of a clear epistemological stance and a political commitment to addressing the country’s illiteracy situation. These are two defining elements in Soares’ career. Her commitment to public schools and the political dimension of early literacy is a legacy that should nourish the training of early literacy teachers and public policies, not only for children but also for young people, adults, and the elderly.

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