

## Early literacy, literacy, and families: a theme in three times\*<sup>1</sup>

Isabel Cristina Alves da Silva Frade<sup>2</sup>

Orcid: 0000-0003-0805-7581

Ana Paula Pedersoli Pereira<sup>3</sup>

Orcid: 0000-0002-8022-9336

### Abstract

This article seeks to understand how society creates expectations for families to participate in their children's early literacy and literacy processes in three historical moments. We developed a document analysis in advertisements, printed materials, and frequency maps for the first period (end of the 19th and early 20th century). We can perceive that the expectation of using *abecedários* in the household comes from an inherited cultural capital regarding writing, close to the economic capital. However, popular ABCs are also present. We used data from empirical research on early literacy in the domestic space in the rural area of Minas Gerais for the second period (1950s, 1960s, and 1970s). The experiences of domestic early literacy reveal family investments, and we can identify intersections between family, social, and school literacy practices using account books, leaflets, prayers, letters, and school and literature books. In the third period (21st century), we analyze the documents of the Brazilian federal program *Conta pra mim* using the idea, disseminated in several studies, that nowadays, writing permeates children's experiences from an early age due to a social process beyond school. Nonetheless, we conclude that the expectation that early literacy knowledge would be developed in the household is idealized when considering the inequality of literacy distribution and the differences in language use by underprivileged groups.

### Keywords

Learning to read and write – Literacy – Families.

\* English version by: Viviane Coelho Caldeira Ramos. The authors take full responsibility for the translation of the text, including titles of books/articles and the quotations originally published in Portuguese.

**1-** The dataset supporting the findings of this study was published in the article itself and in: PEREIRA, Ana Paula. *Memórias de alfabetização no espaço doméstico: mobilizações e estratégias familiares em torno do ensino-aprendizagem da leitura e da escrita*. 2013. Dissertação (Mestrado em Educação) – Faculdade de Educação, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, 2013. Available in the Repositório Institucional da UFMG: *Memórias de alfabetização no espaço doméstico: mobilizações e estratégias familiares em torno do ensino-aprendizagem da leitura e da escrita*. (MG- 1950 /1960/ 1970) <https://share.google/6wfpJJeftfBOrSmTR2>

**2-** Faculdade de Educação da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais – Belo Horizonte – Minas Gerais – Brazil – Contact: icrisfrade@gmail.com

**3-** Universidade Estadual de Minas Gerais. – Belo Horizonte – Minas Gerais – Brazil – Contact: paulinhapedersoli@gmail.com



<https://doi.org/10.1590/S1678-4634202551281622en>

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## Introduction

In several studies, the term early literacy [*alfabetização*] specifies and designates the acquisition of a graphic competence, that is, the acquisition of a written system (Soares, 1998). The work *Letramento: um tema em três gêneros*, which inspired this article, was a landmark in the educational field. In this book, Magda Soares defines literacy [*letramento*] as the “state of condition that a social group or individual acquires as a consequence of having appropriated themselves of writing and its social practices” (Soares, 1998, p. 39). The author also discusses the emergence of the term literacy, which is related to contemporary problems identified in several countries. Though many groups learned how to read and write, they do not use writing for different social and cultural ends.

Historical studies undertaken by Roger Chartier (2002) and Antonio Castilho Gomez (2003) use the term written culture in its broadest sense, involving instances, subjects, objects, and different materialities. These terms have differences and relations because the written culture, which is socially and culturally produced, reverberates on how alphabetic culture, which represents the speech with signifiers, is transmitted and appropriated. In turn, mastering this writing technology dialogues with the conditions in which the written culture is produced in each context, time, and place.

Resuming the uses that establish the need for early literacy in history, studies conducted by historians of written culture, such as Harvey Graff (1990), Jean Hébrard (2002), and Vinão Frago (1993) show a diversity of uses, purposes, instances, objects, and instruments involved in the practices of Western societies. All this leads us to question: What institution (monastery, commerce, state bureaucracy, church, family, school) was in charge of this transmission, and to what ends? With which purposes and expectations were defined the abilities (writing/tracing, reading, writing, and other systems) involved in the use of writing? In which language did one learn how to read and write (Latin? Mother language?)? In which handwritten or printed supports (such as prayers, recipes, accounting books, ABCs, church booklets, notary documents, letters, etc.) were the texts accessed? In which countries and regions learning to read and write had the greatest impulse and why? Which groups benefited from this knowledge?

When considering mass schooling, which established itself in the 19th century, we find that early literacy and the teaching of the first letters were the core of the school's social role. Even though the school institution has become hegemonic in this transmission, creating knowledge, theories, times, progressions, materials, supports, and instruments for learning how to read and write, in a process that Magda Soares (2001, 2002) calls the inevitable schooling, we should relate school to other spheres of transmission to understand the social-historical perspective of these definitions. If the parents were the single educators for a long time, when mass school is established, the systems “started to offer the teaching of reading and writing as a non-shared heritage” (Braslavsky, 2004, p. 154). With this hegemony, families start to be unauthorized and are represented as having retrograde and non-conventional practices while also hold accountable for children's early literacy.

Brian Street's (2014) works criticized the autonomous form of literacy, considering it an ideological practice that involves power relations because not all literacies are valued. From a socio-anthropological perspective, we are then in a movement that indicates the diversity of literacies in a society that legitimates certain types of literacy and, in the case of several countries, such as Brazil, in a field of scaring social inequalities.

Considering these assumptions, we seek to understand, in three different moments, how diversified the materials and experiences can be, as well as how societies raise expectations that families can participate in the early literacy process of their children.

From a methodological perspective, for the first moment (end of 19th century and early 20th century) we work with sources that present some evidence of the use of written materials in the domestic space and analyze different materials, such as frequency maps, advertisements, a French and a Brazilian ABCs, produced by the company Milk Flour Nestlé. In the second moment (1950s, 1960s, and 1970s), we used data collected from oral sources through interviews given by members of six families who declared they learned how to read and write at home in a rural area of Minas Gerais, Brazil. For the current moment (first two decades of the 21st century), our main source was the document published as a government instruction in the scope of *Plano Nacional de Alfabetização* (PNA- Early Literacy National Plan). Besides these sources, we cross the data with the literacy census in the country.<sup>4</sup>

## 1<sup>st</sup> time - ABCs for families: some evidence

In this first time, we will present two situations of ABCs offering to families. According to Ségolène le Men (2012), the ABCs presented letters following the alphabetic order in various supports and not just books, which have been used since the origin of writing as a very old form of written culture transmission to seek a series of games and objects that would lead to desirable learning. During the Middle Ages, the production of ABCs became a rite of passage to written culture, and they continue in later periods until today. Shephanou and Souza (2016) reinforce this idea, also indicating that the term ABCs (*abecedários*) varies in definition, dates back to the invention of writing, is related to copyist monks in the Middle Ages, with calligraphy, school books, and even travel books. For the authors, the ABCs

Refer to the alphabet, abc; abecedary and alphabet are associated words but not coincident. Abecedary establish an arrangement of letters, a collection, and this is a fundamental distinction. The letters of an alphabet can vary in different languages. However, their collection establishes an abecedary (Stephanou; Souza, 2016, p. 299).

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**4-** The set of data that supports the results of this study was published in the article itself and in: PEREIRA, A. P. **Memórias de alfabetização no espaço doméstico:** mobilizações e estratégias familiares em torno do ensino-aprendizagem da leitura e da escrita. 2013. Dissertation (Master's in Education) – Faculdade de Educação, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, 2013. Repositório Institucional da UFMG: Memórias de alfabetização no espaço doméstico: mobilizações e estratégias familiares em torno do ensino-aprendizagem da leitura e da escrita. (MG- 1950 /1960/ 1970) <https://share.google/6wfpJefffB0rSmTR2>

Though the ABCs are defined as a book to learn how to read, we cannot say that this is a book of school learning. When considering the abecedary as a collection, sometimes thematic, organized in alphabetic order, we can define a genre but not always establish its audiences and functions. Being a material that dialogues with the alphabetic written culture, its relation with learning how to read is also strong. Sthephanou and Sousa (2016, p. 306) comment a study of Duvallon (2010) and question the school use of the abecedary:

Duvallon (2010) shows that in France the abecedaries were abundantly disseminated since the early 19th century, also called alphabets or ABCs, to be used at home to encourage young children to learn the alphabet, an obligatory passage to reach reading and writing.

Studies by Ségolène Le Men (1984) about the illustrated ABCs in France, as well as the works by Anne-Marie Chartier (2007) and Jean Hébrard (2002) mentioned the popular ABCs used in the ancient regime in small schools, which combine Catholicism and instruction, and those aiming upper classes, edited in collections called education libraries, to be used at home and in the format of albums produced until now. Their format and support change depending on the different audiences: popular and upper classes.

Anne-Marie Chartier's (2007) studies show that, during France's 18th and 19th centuries, wealthy families had a pedagogy of handling luxurious ABCs in domestic spaces. They learned how to read unsystematically and with the adults' intervention at home, while young children from low-income groups learned in community and Christian schools with Christian ABCs. The author comments about how these ABCs were used by the upper classes through playful, free, and interactive practices involving the families and the children, mediated by the illustrated ABCs. According to her, at the time, these abecedaries were image books that sought to instill in very young children the taste of liking to read. Even when presented in the sequence from A to Z, the alphabet could be consulted in the order the children wanted, not linearly, as they could ask adults to read the caption close to an illustration. After establishing this interest for the book, they suggested the family to teach children the names of the letters, so they could be recognized out of order, and the memorization of a small repertoire of syllables and words to be pronounced and, later, spelled. When consulting the alphabet again, the child could recognize or remember some known syllables based on the free, non-sequential, without reflection, and based on family interactions.

Below, we reproduce a page of an illustrated alphabet in the 19th century, published in France, to perceive the ludic aspect that involved this type of material that was widely offered for sale in France, which was organized by different themes, such as animals, plants, toys, etc.

**Figure 1** – Illustrated alphabet page



Source: LE MEN, Ségolène. *Alphabet de la Fosfatine Falières*, 1984, n/p.

These practices cannot be considered an anticipation of literacy, risking an anachronistic view. Still, they do lead us to think about the relationship or the difference between school and family practices, as well as the relation between age and the time of writing acquisition.

In Brazil, documents from *Escolas Régias* in the 19th century prove that children aged four and five years old attended schools, indicating that the age factor was not responsible for the division and standardization of contents, as children and young people from four to 17 years old were in the same class. Observations made in the *Mapas de frequência* [Frequency Maps] of Minas Gerais province in the 19th century show different



performances regardless of the factor age, which reinforces the relevance of researching other transmission spaces. The maps show that some children would supposedly go to school with knowledge learned at home and in church, without school's control over acquisition time, which was not yet hegemonic in this issue (Frade, 2010a). We can even see that some children had short time records regarding school frequency but a greater performance. Where did they learn?

The obligatory teaching of the first letters was already established in the Brazilian Empire through the 1827 General Education Law. However, it was only since the additional act of 1834, which transferred the school obligations to the provinces, that segments of the underprivileged classes could attend school. Nonetheless, we cannot say that the existence of a law corresponds to the school institutions. The little expansion of school as an institution can perhaps be assessed through the first Brazilian census, which shows that the rate of literate people was 17.7%, with a great distribution difference; the highest number of literate people was concentrated in the city of Rio de Janeiro and in the state of Rio Grande do Sul (Ferraro, 2009).

Parallel to this institutionalization of mass schooling, hiring tutors to teach at home was a well-known phenomenon. This was a specific process that involved the upper classes who had the resources to do so. Some materials, such as the ABCs, aimed exactly at these social groups, as can be seen in an advertisement published on Almanak Laemmert in 1866.

To learn how to read block letters or manuscripts, ornate for the children's easy understanding, with copies of animals and birds, fishes, flowers, fruits, and many other objects fully colored, forming eight cards inside an elegant painted little box of 3\$000.

There is no treat more beautiful or useful to give the children than this picturesque alphabet, through which, in a short time and almost playfully, they will learn how to read, while the beautiful images attract their curiosity, providing the occasion for parents to give them many instructive explanations (Lajolo; Zilberman, 1996, p. 193).

When analyzing this advertisement, we can see how varied the illustrated abecedy is in terms of shape, as the colorful cards could be accommodated in a box. Ségolène Le Men (2012) describes the use of other ABCs formats in France; for instance, the author presents puzzles and an alphabet shaped as a one-page poster (p. 44), the *Loterie Alfabétique des 100 images*, composed of 100 colorful cards (p. 51) with images, words, and numbers to be computed when the player won or lost, which should be cut and placed in a box for card games involving several children.

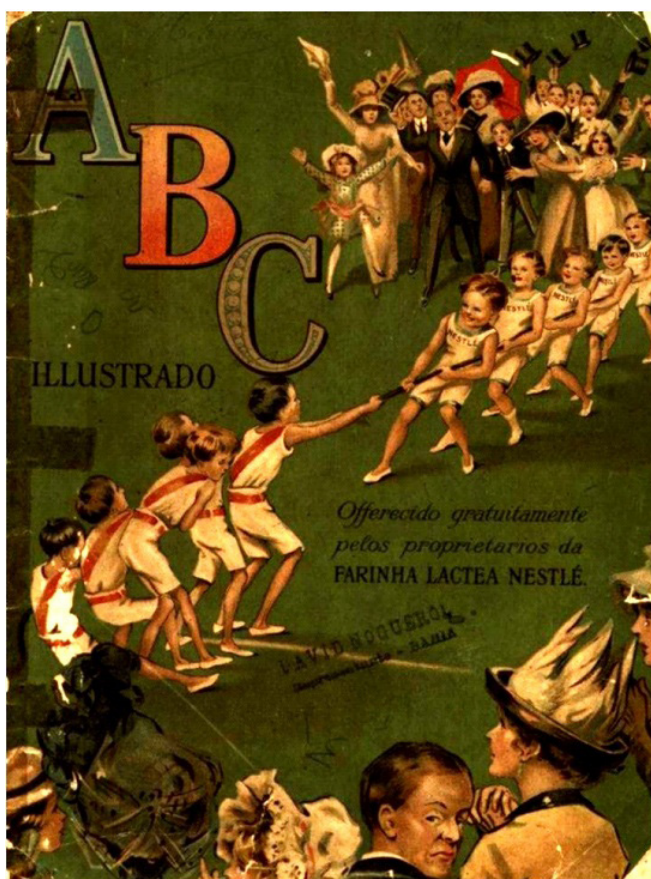
In the case of the Brazilian advertisement, the promise was that children could learn by playing in a short time through the attraction of images, while parents could give many instructive explanations. It is difficult to think of a pedagogy of use without consulting the material but knowing the alphabet and the letters associated with the



images could make a difference in its use. The idea of picturesque<sup>5</sup> is the fact of being interesting, different, and unusual, that is, this material was certainly not similar to the one offered to children in the schooling process.

When discussing the French case, reinforcing how the ABCs shape the collective memory, Ségolène Le Men (2012) also indicates the use of alphabets for advertisement and ideology transmission. When resuming evidence of the alphabet used in other instances, another example of a material circulated in Brazil should be presented regarding families: the *ABC Ilustrado* (Illustrated ABC), an advertising material published by Nestlé in 1927. As with publicity texts, they were distributed for free. When comparing their content to the literacy rate and purchasing power, we can imagine what families they want to reach.

**Figure 2** – ABC Ilustrado



Source: Private archive.

**5-** In Le Men (1984), there is a French alphabet from the 19th century which has in the title the word Picturesque.

**Figure 3 – ABC Ilustrado (continuation)**



Source: Private archive.

Caption of the letters O and P: O is the orphão [orphans] whose life was saved by milk flour Nestlé - P is the pequenito [tiny] that get along with the milk flour Nestlé.

Considering the images, the possibilities of circulation and distribution, and the population that could use such an abecedary, we can say that the audience was possibly an urban public, which consumed industrialized products, very different from the essentially rural public that predominated in the geographic distribution and that was the majority in Brazil at the time. Moreover, an economy based on the agrarian sector was prevalent. Certainly, its audience was amidst a minority of literate people in 1920 (28.8%), according to Ferraro (2009). Nevertheless, we stress the use of ABC letters by the popular classes. Despite being used in schools in the 19th century, as Frade (2010b) shows, its use extrapolates the school because the material was sold as leaflets in markets around Northeast Brazil up to the 21st century.



## **2nd time - Literacy in the domestic space:** Evidence of strategies and materials from the 1950s to the 1970s

In this 2nd time, we analyze some early literacy practices in the domestic space. In the 19th century, teaching at home was a common practice, and anyone who mastered certain abilities could carry out this education at home. When this person no longer saw himself/herself as able for the task, the family would resort to a schoolmaster (Vilella, 2010). Almost a hundred years later, what we have studied through oral history with five subjects who declared they had learned how to read and write in the rural area between the 1950s and the 1970s helps us to think about how written culture is produced in these spaces, the strategies, motivations, materials, and the influence (or not) of school and other social instances.

Lahire's (2008) studies show that the contact of the subjects with the written language in different spaces allows different appropriations. According to him, while this contact with reading and writing is practical, unconscious, and incorporated in the families, it becomes an analytical, objective, and conscious contact through teaching reading and writing in school.

This leads us to establish some differences between written culture as practice and/or as competence acquisition. In this sense, there is a power relation between the writing knowledge acquired at home and at school. In some testimonies collected in the empirical research, the writing learned at home is supported by the school that legitimizes domestic learning. An interviewee highlights that her mother would always resort to school to know what was learned there, so as to retell the teacher in the domestic space, showing that school establishes itself not only as a space of power but one whose language is legitimized in society.

Mother Nemir: ...And the girls, once in a while, would go to the school in the city to do the exams...I knew the principal, and she would always tell me what was done in school, then I would tell Lenir (the home teacher) to teach the girls... (Interview excerpt, 2012).

Between the 1950s and 1970s, a dialogue can be established with the evidence of parents' testimonies that, when not being able to teach their children due to the accumulation of household chores and difficulties in teaching beyond the rudiments of the ABCs, a person that could read and write was "hired" to continue the teachings of reading and writing at home:

Mundica: My mother started everything, she taught the ABC, but I remember that later on, she didn't continue because she didn't have time and she didn't really know how to teach us. And my mom wanted us to learn how to read and write well. So, she found a person that could teach us and she paid for it (Interview excerpt, 2012).

According to Pereira (2013), in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, in specific spaces (rural areas) and in the region (Minas Gerais), different motivations could explain families'



mobilization toward the transmission of reading and writing: as a way to guarantee the children's safety because they would not have to go alone to school, as a form of family discipline (writing as a punishment), for a musical use (read music sheet), or by supposing the existence of gaps in the educational system at the time. Therefore, through the research we can see that there was not always intentions and motivations solely related to knowing the technology of writing *per se*, which questions if the focus on domestic education is originally related to the abilities needed for early reading.

The family, the family context, establishes itself as a socializing instance and, in the case of the research reported here, we see that it created mobilizations, dispositions, and strategies around reading and writing from which attitudes, behaviors, and ways to enter and participate in the literate society can be learned.

We could see different mediators (parents, hired teachers, and sisters) and the use of strategies that combine home social uses with the school traditions, such as the presence of school books, Catechism and novena books, religious leaflets, magazines, the practices of recording the planting and animal husbandry, and the exchange of letters.

Mundica, an interviewee, helps us to understand her mother's actions:

Mundica: I remember that my mother started to teach me when I was 5 years old. It was then 1958. Then she started with the A, E, I, O, U. She would cover and uncover the letters, and we had to know the one she asked; you had to know letter by letter, and after, she would teach the... is consonants, right? The letters B, C, G... we do say consonant, right? At the time, my mother said we were learning the ABC (Interview excerpt, 2012).

Despite not systematizing this process, we can perceive that Mundica's mother used her knowledge about the alphabetic method, which commonly used until the early 20th century (Frade, 2005). Mundica shows that her mother, the first mediator of writing teaching at home, besides teaching the alphabet letters, also taught the Catechism. According to her, this moment took place every night when her mother would teach the ten commandments. At first, she only had to listen to her mother reading and later she had to know them in order and recite them aloud. At the same home, she later had the mediator of a hired "teacher". For two years, Consolação followed this process and, according to Mundica, it happened daily from 11 am to 4 pm, with a 40-minute break for lunch in a bedroom. The excerpt below reveals this practice:

Mundica: She arrived at home with many papers with "E" connected and other letters. But she saw that we already knew something, so she put these paper sheets by the side and started like this, connecting a letter with another; it is called a syllable, right? Maria da Consolação, she started with the BA, BE, BI, BO, BU... After, she started to form small little words, with 4 letters, I do remember some words: VACA, CAMA, MALA... (Interview excerpt, 2012).

According to Mundica, the mediator took many stories in which the name Lili appeared. When showing her the pre-book *O livro de Lili* digitalized<sup>6</sup>, the interviewee said she did not remember the book nor its lessons, but she emphasized that the name Lili was always present in the stories her teacher taught:

Mundica: Consolação... every time she came to Crucilândia, she would come with a bunch of little stories written in the notebook. I don't remember any of them... I just remember the name Lili, and after, I would always write in my stories about a doll called Lili. [...] There was also, in my house, the teaching of Catechism, and we had the *Folhinha Mariana* [a religious leaflet] that we would read something about the saint of the day (Interview excerpt, 2012).

The mediator brought elements from her school experience evoking characters, materials, and an organization of interactions marked by schedules and breaks, such as in school, which show that home and school interconnect. Nemir, another interviewee, reported that, though studying at home, in some moments, she did tests in the school of the city to know how her learning at home was, there was a belief that school is the place where teaching is done correctly and with the best methods. The excerpt below proves how school is the reference for the practices, even when mediators use methods already updated in school pedagogy. Furthermore, there are also intersections with materials that, possibly, did not circulate in school.

Nemir: I do remember something...though we studied at home I remember that we would make tests in the school of Piracema, I can't tell you for how long...but we would go and my mother would say that it was for us to see if we were together with school...I clearly remember a magazine of Itambé, my father always received the magazine of Itambé, because he sold milk and the cooperative of the city distributed, you know? (Interview excerpt, 2012).

Similarly, Antônio, another subject of the research, had more than one mediator in the home process, her mother and Lígia, who had studied until the Year 4. According to the interviewee, besides teaching, Lígia also helped with the household chores and there was a determined teaching routine, which happened every day, except Sundays, for two hours in the living room:

Antônio: It was everyday, two hours a day. From 12 to 2 am. We would have lunch early at the farm, so by noon it had been a long time since lunch.. I remember she would finish organizing the kitchen and then it started...We would go to the living room, it was the house's living room and my mom did not let anyone pass by because it would bother us, you know?

From Antônio's testimony about how Lígia taught, we perceive that, as Mundica's mother, she used the principles of the alphabetic method:

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**6-** *O livro de Lili*, produced by Anita Fonseca, in the 1940s, in Minas Gerais, used the global method and broadly circulated in Minas Gerais schools and other states in the country.



Antônio: I remember Lígia taking my hand and teaching me to write some letters and even words... and I also remember her reading stories, little ones, but I liked it. She copied the whole alphabet...letter by letter separate and then we had copy everything...After she taught us to join the letters and then later we could assemble some words...the littlest ones, but we could (Interview excerpt, 2012).

Evoking the use practices of writing in the family, Antônio highlights other ways, non-schooling, the family practiced reading and writing.

Ah! I remember my father writing everything about the farm things. My father had a notebook and there was the whole control of everything about the cows, the time of weaning, the time to pump milk...And I followed everything because, from an early age, I worked with my father...At night, in my home, there was a Catechism class (Interview excerpt, 2012).

Fátima, another interviewee, in a very peculiar way, started to learn at home when she was seven years old. According to her, it all started with her interest and her learning was practically without mediation. However, she tells that she always had her oldest sister's help when she had some difficulties. Her sister taught her the alphabet, later the syllables, and the words. Despite not being something systematic, we can perceive the use of the methodological principles of the alphabetic method.

Fátima: My sister was the oldest of all of us. And she was always in the bedroom embroidering and I would stay over the machine looking the beautiful things she did...I spent hours looking... In fact, I think that everything started by my interest, there was no time and nothing was programmed...I had some history books... I can't remember the name (Interview excerpt, 2012).

Vera, another interviewee, started her process of learning how to read and write at home, with the mediation of an older sister and how the sister's way of doing things was similar to the mediators of Mundica, Fátima, and Antônio:

Vera: I remember that everything started at home...I was seven years old and it was my oldest sister...My sister taught me all the letters...and after she told me the names of the syllables...I remember her writing all the letters in my notebook, the letters of the alphabet, and after joining the letters and then I had to write what she said. And only after that she taught me the words (Interview excerpt, 2012).

There were other family practices of using writing, when the mother took advantage of some opportunities to check her children's abilities.

Ah! I remembered something... My mom, whenever she could, asked us to write letters for her, so she could send to the siblings and to her siblings who lived away...She asked us to stop and read everything from the start and she would say if it was good or not and sometimes I had to

erase everything and start again because my mom decided to change everything... (Interview excerpt, 2012).

From this research, we sought to present ways of transmission, uses of writing, and materials used at home that indicate that families invest in early literacy with strategies that dialogue with schooling ways or with practices of writing use, religious or professional. Ferraro (2009, p. 31) indicates that illiteracy “has been seen as a phenomenon predominantly rural.” Considering the research data, families moved against the conditions of the time, when literacy rates, including urban spaces, were 42.8% (1950), 53.3 (1960), and 61.3 (1950).

### **3rd Time - Emergent literacy and family literacy:** Early literacy in the family in the *Plano Nacional de Alfabetização*

In this topic, we will deal with a third time/situation involving expectations about the role of families, in a time of school universalization (21st century). We will connect some concepts about emergent literacy with the one present in the extinct *Política Nacional de Alfabetização* implemented in Jair Bolsonaro's government in Brazil<sup>7</sup> Though already revoked, this policy continues to have its effect. The policy intended to implement, among other actions, an incentive for families to participate in children's early literacy, and some instructions and materials were published for its implementation. However, we have to establish the connections between this early literacy policy and the defense of homeschooling, a movement reinforced by sectors of that government, which created much resistance in the educational sectors, considering a possible displacement of the State role in education towards the accountability of families. We should highlight that active members in this policy were highly critical towards Magda Soares, with her literacy perspective, indicating the dispute over early literacy meanings and actions. In this sense, even the use of the term literacy was a strong sign in this dispute.

The discussion on learning to write that takes place outside school is related to studies that intensified in the late 20th century about how young children learned before reaching formal education. Berta Braslavsky (2004) works on the concept of emergent literacy, a term that, according to her, is researched since the 1950s and reached its peak in the 1990s, connected to practices, mainly in the family, prior to school. Following these experiences, Braslavsky (2004) cites studies that call emergent or “precocious” literacy the one developed through the influences of children's first experiences with spoken language and writing in their social environment, highlighting the vital importance of the practices developed in the families. The author indicates that there is no single definition of family literacy and it “generally describes the different ways families develop and use early literacy in all tasks and daily activities. It can encompass reading, writing, listening, and speaking with their parents and other adults, and the independent explorations”

**7-** The dossier “*Política Nacional de Alfabetização em foco: olhares de professores e pesquisadores*”. *Revista Brasileira De Alfabetização*, 1(10). <https://doi.org/10.47249/rba.2019.v1.381> brings analytical elements to understand the concepts involved in this policy. See specially the article from Clécio Bunzen Junior *Um breve decálogo sobre o conceito de ‘literacia’ na Política Nacional de Alfabetização (PNA, 2019)* | *Revista Brasileira de Alfabetização*. Accessed December 27, 2024





(Braslavsky, 2004, p.155). Furthermore, she highlights that there is a major complexity in the concept of family (nuclear or extended?), the explanations on how and why writing is used, and the differences in their cultural, racial, and ethnical inheritance. We add religion and work activities to these inheritances.

The author highlights that the term emergent indicates “that emerges from the child” but warns about the controversy surrounding this term, as it does not mean that learning happens naturally, without informants’ interventions. The Report IRA/NAYEC from 1998, cited by the same author, indicate that “the first years of a child’s life – from birth until eight years old – is the most important period for literacy development” (Braslavsky, 2004, p. 173).

In this perspective, other studies capture the cognitive processes involved in the acquisition of the alphabetic writing system, such as the ones developed by Emilia Ferreiro and collaborators in the scope of Psycholinguistics, which shows that several contextualization about the writing system formulated by very young children do not rely exclusively on school mediation. Hence, when participating in social situations of writing use mediated by adults in the domestic space, children appropriate several types of knowledge involved in the written cultures that circulate outside the school space.

Braslavsky (2004) discusses some characteristics of emerging early literacy, a natural process that is not directive. Approaching principles of an emergent/precocious early literacy pedagogy and citing several authors, the author lists some common points: the diversity of learnings, the idea of a *continuum* and not defined phases, the active process undertaken by children, and the importance of cooperative learning through the interaction with more advanced children and informed adults. Citing several authors that presented a posture balanced regarding the direct intervention and more contextualized learning that occurs in action<sup>8</sup>, the author also alerts that learning in the context of use does not exempt information about technical/formal aspects of writing, as long as children demand them.

The word emergent that qualifies the term has not been much used in Brazil. In a recent study about the congress *Letramento e Cultura Escrita*, Isabel Frade, Otilia Heinig, and Andreia Brito (Anped, 2021<sup>9</sup>) worked with the adjectives in works presented in the main event in the area and the term emergent does not appear. However, we could elaborate on what this adjective means when it is appropriated by the *Política Nacional de Alfabetização* (Brasil, 2019b). In this policy, the term emergent literacy is thus defined:

[...] establishes a set of knowledge, abilities, and attitudes related to reading and writing, developed before early literacy. (...) Summing up, emergent literacy includes experiences and knowledge about reading and writing acquired playfully and adequately to the children’s age, formally or informally, before learning how to read and write (PNA, p. 22)

**8-** This learning in action is not always followed by the explicitation about this knowledge by the children.

**9-** Work asked by the WG 10 – *Alfabetização, Leitura e Escrita [Early literacy, Reading, and writing]* - *Reunião anual da Anped*. [Anped Annual Meeting] 2021. The article resulting from this work can be found In: FRADE, Isabel; HEINIG, Otilia; BRITO, Andreia. Uma rede semântica em torno do letramento: termos e adjetivações e seus possíveis significados. Educação, Santa Maria, v. 49, p. 1-25, 2024. Available at: <https://periodicos.ufsm.br/reveducacao>

Children's success in learning to read and write is strongly connected to the family environment and the practices and experiences related to language, reading, and writing they had experienced with their parents, family members, or caretakers, even before joining formal education. This set of practices and experiences receives the name of family literacy (Wasik, 2004; Sénéchal, 2008). One practice that has a greater impact in the child's school future is the shared reading of stories, or an adult reading aloud for the child; this practice widens the vocabulary, develops the understanding of oral language, introduces morphosyntactic patterns, kindles imagination, instills the taste for reading, and strengthens family bonds (Carpentieri *et al.*, 2011) (Brasil, 2019b, p. 23).

The association of the term emergent literacy with the term family literacy is coherent with the studies investigating the learning of writing by young children at home. However, in a society in which schooling and early literacy in families are unequal, the prescription to use certain practices as a way to advance the experiences and the presentation of models of mediation practice raises a central political problem, resulting on considering that all families could have a literate behavior toward school knowledge and practices, regardless of the school opportunities given to the parents, the type of access to books, adults' work activities, among other factors. Below, is a prescription idealized for families:

Besides talking with their young children, parents should also read to them. Through reading, parents help their kids be familiar with the letters, the words, the numbers, and the books, developing abilities that will be necessary for school success. Parents can use books to teach them many things, such as life in the family, celebrations and traditions, adults' work, care for others, and nature. Parents can also help them recognize letters and words in their daily lives, pointing them out when they are in and outside the home. All these interactions between parents and children can become part of the family's daily activities, making literacy learning a joyful family event and contributing to guarantee children's success in school and life (Dra. Barbara H. Wasik, Professor at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Coauthor and organizer of the book "Handbook of Family") (Brasil, 2019b, p. 10).

The construction of the policy Conta pra mim [Tell me], materialized in the manual that instructs families about how to act with children, as well as the digitalized books adapted to be used at home, shows an idealized view of early literacy in the family. The fact that very different literacy practices coexist in our country is not presented as a cultural, social, and political issue, but as a natural condition, as if the family literacy practices led parents to become readers and to get involved in their children's school life. Contradictorily, though recognizing inequality, this unequal condition is exactly what would break even poverty, as seen below:

[regarding] your children's school life: follow the homework, participate in school meeting, and understand better children's needs and difficulties.

- › Parents are motivated to resume their studies and become readers.
- › In a country like Brazil, still marked by the unfavorable socioeconomic condition of millions of families, Family Literacy is a powerful instrument to break away from the poverty cycle (Brasil, 2019a, p. 17).



The manual for families approaches the following practices: verbal interaction, dialogued reading, storytelling, contact with writing, diverse activities, and motivation. The material strongly highlights the importance of reading for children. However, there are proposals of family interaction with children through reading, for instance, which suppose a schooled thought and the didactization of interactions around the books:

When reading, follow the words in the text with the finger. In this way, the child will notice that the text is different from the illustration and that we read from the left to the right and from top to bottom.

› Make questions that lead children to get familiar with books and printed texts: “What is the right way to hold a book?”, “Where is the text? And the illustrations?”, “What is the first word in this page? And the last?”

› Highlight the initial sound of words: “Son, do you know the first sound of the word maçã [apple]? Yes, that is it! It is the sound [m-m-m-m]!”

› Point out the letters and the punctuation signs present in the pages. Call your child’s attention to the sounds, the names, and the shapes of the letters, as well as the roles of the punctuation signs: “What punctuation sign do we use to indicate a question? Show it in the book to mommy!”, “See! A letter can have different shapes and sizes. There are majuscule and minuscule letters. Have you ever noticed that your name starts with a majuscule letter?” (Brasil, 2019a, p. 42).

The displacing the role of school experience towards a pedagogy for the families blurs the contribution of childhood education as a right that reverberates in the emergent literacy of underprivileged children. Contrasting with the term *literacia*, which points out an autonomous conception of literacy focused on the development of abilities and competencies, the concept of emergent literacy, in its origin related to social practices, according to Soares (1998, 2010) can be used by cultural policies involving families and institutions – libraries and childhood education, for instance – as knowledge, attitudes, and practices that complement each other in these two instances.

To contribute to young children’s emergent literacy, institutions such as the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) indicate combined strategies and “recommend activities carefully planned and adequate to children’s development, together with meaningful, regular, and active interactions between children and adults around written language” (Leal *et al.*, 2006, p. 57).

When analyzing the terms, knowledge, and aptitudes, we see that emergent literacy can result from how society uses writing and how children appropriate themselves and question this culture. In a literate society, if literacies had the same nature, children would “naturally” develop attitudes and knowledge. We would then be talking more about alliterate culture than about competencies, but mediated practices would hardly be instilled in families, as the MEC [Ministry of Education] material idealizes for parents.

The project *Conta pra mim* was thought as a way to educate children towards vocabulary development and speech correction, providing instructions to families, including those with low schooling, about a form of oral communication, programed

outside the popular classes' culture, and proposing an artificialized way of "thinking by writing", disconnected from the real family uses of writing and the relationship with family orality. That is, it relies on a literate thought built within families with certain literate practices that, for many generations, are built from a school repertoire that is not equally built to all.

Analyzing this type of proposal, very distant from the reality of many Brazilian realities, we perceive the risk of studies and proposals based more on competencies and abilities than in the cultural aspects involved in this learning and in the rights to be guaranteed for the children and families. There is a great difference when school and cultural experiences are enriched with opportunities to produce written culture in community and social projects, including libraries and schools, involving all actors and valuing families' oral culture, in a sort of bidialectalism for transformation, as Magda Soares (1986) proposes in her book *Linguagem e Escola* [Language and School].

## Final remarks

When working the three times involving the relationship of families with early literacy and literacy, we see differences between families' opportunities to access early literacy. During the 1st time, the expectation of using specific materials in the domestic space shows that the family space brings an inherited cultural capital regarding writing that is not distant from the economic capital (Ortiz, 1983). In this perspective, families that did not have the opportunity of schooling when it was under implementation in Brazil at the time could hardly use or access this material and would possibly not mobilize themselves to teach at home without this capital acquired through school. However, social changes in this distribution and differentiated dispositions regarding written culture occurred in other decades. The practical practices perceived in the testimonies of people who learned how to read and write at home during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s show other conditions and different forms of appropriation. Even though the schooling offer is not yet universalized, during the 2nd time, in situations of domestic literacy, the experiences show intersections between family, social, and school literacy practices. During the 3rd time, we see that writing permeates children's experiences from a very early age and that learning to read and write is already part of a social process that extrapolates school. However, if the distribution of early literacy and the uses of writing still have not reached low-income families, the expectation of developing attitudes, knowledge, and abilities at home continue to be idealized.

The universalization of access to public school in Brazil took place in the 1990s, but we have not reached literacy universalization in the 21st century. In the 2010<sup>10</sup> Census, the literacy rate among the population aged 10 years or more was 90.4%, estimating 14 million illiterate people, changing a little from the 2000 rate, which was 87,2% of literate people (Ferraro, 2009). According to the *2019 Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílio*, the illiteracy rate of the population over 10 years old was estimated in 6.6% (11 million illiterate people). This indicates that we had some improvement. However, though

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**10** - When we wrote this article, the release of the 2020 Census was three years late, and the data about early literacy was still not published.



we have changed some percentage points, the early literacy map is unequally distributed among the poor, blacks, and those living in certain regions, following social inequality. If we think about the expectations that families help their children to read and write, which would be in the non-literate group or with low schooling level? Which families could mobilize themselves to intensify their children's contact with early literacy and literacy?

Contemporary literacy ended up consolidating itself in a schooling form, with specialized knowledge, and the professionalization of its transmission, that is, as a legitimate knowledge "outside the domain of laic people". In this context, what expectation can we raise about family participation? If a part of them reproduces a capital inherited in the cultivation of written culture, how does one build a capital with families that did not have the same conditions and possibilities? The pandemic period made it clear the unequal map of opportunities and the almost impossibility of families to teach how to read and write at home. The pandemic period made it clear the unequal map of opportunities and the almost impossibility of families to teach how to read and write at home. Though believing that the children's first experiences with the families are fundamental in the appropriation of written culture, the early literacy and literacy policies need to be more encompassing when considering access to a certain literate culture as a cultural policy.

Though believing that children's first experiences with their families are fundamental for the appropriation of written culture, the early literacy and literacy policies need to be more comprehensive, from the perspective of access to a certain literate culture as a cultural policy. The school has the role of working with what other contexts cannot promote and widen the cultural repertoire of the written world experienced by different groups, mainly those more excluded, fulfilling its role to reduce educational inequalities, a fight undertaken by Magda Soares in all her academic production and social work.

Researchers and school knowing the practices of family literacies can guide expectations on what is understood as a respectful, culturally and socially referenced relationship between school and families.

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*Received on December 19, 2023*

*Revised on December 18, 2024*

*Approved on January 10, 2025*

**Editor:** Prof. Dr. Émerson de Pietri

**Isabel Cristina Alves da Silva Frade** holds a master's and a doctorate in Education from the Faculdade de Educação/UFMG. She is a full professor in the Education Graduate Program at FaE/UFMG. She is a researcher at Centro de Alfabetização, Leitura e Escrita and a member of the group Cultura Escrita da FaE.

**Ana Paula Pedersoli Pereira** holds a master's and a doctorate in Education from the Faculdade de Educação/UFMG. She is a professor at Universidade Estadual de Minas Gerais. She is a member of CEALE and the group Cultura Escrita do GEPHE/FaE/UFMG.