

## Newspaper Reading and Social Exclusion of the Elderly

A leitura de jornal e a exclusão de idosos

La lecture de journal et l'exclusion sociale de personnes âgées

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to verify if the elderly, specifically nursing home residents in the city of Marília, believe reading to be a necessary component of their everyday lives. A sample of seven residents, ranging from 74 to 99 years of age, participated in this study. The participants were divided into two groups: the reader group and the non-reader group. They engaged in a semi-structured interview that resulted in the possibility of discussing the contents of senior citizen education at their retirement home, their needs and their social reintegration.

**Index terms:** the elderly, newspaper reading, social exclusion, Marília.

### RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo verificar se idosos, moradores em um asilo, da cidade de Marília, sentem necessidade da leitura em seu cotidiano. Participaram da pesquisa por amostragem, sete idosos, com idades variando de 74 a 99 anos. Os participantes foram divididos em dois grupos: grupo leitor e o grupo não-leitor. Responderam à entrevista semi-estruturada que resultou na possibilidade de discutir o conteúdo da educação de idosos que se encontram em asilos, suas necessidades e sua reintegração social.

**Palavras-chave:** idosos, leitura de jornal, exclusão social, Marília.

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article a pour objectif vérifier si des personnes âgées, habitants dans une maison de retraite (résidence), de la ville de Marília, éprouvent la nécessité de

lire dans leur vie quotidienne. Sept personnes âgées, dont l'âge variait entre 74 et 99 ans, ont participé à la recherche par échantillonnage. Les participants ont été séparés en deux groupes: groupe de lecteur et groupe de non-lecteur. Ils ont répondu à une interview semi-structurée qui a rendu possible la discussion sur le contenu de l'éducation des personnes âgées qui se trouvent dans des maisons de retraite (résidence), de leurs nécessités et de leur réintégration sociale.

**Mots clés:** personnes âgées, lecture de journal, exclusion sociale, Marília.

## 1. Introduction

Article 205 of the Brazilian Constitution (1988) states that "education is everyone's right and a duty of the state and of the family" and in article 208, paragraph I, the duty of state education will be fulfilled by ensuring "free and compulsory primary education, including free education to those who did not have access to it at the proper age." Supported by the Constitution, the State Board of Education in its Resolution CEE 09/2000, established guidelines for implementing the educational system of the State of São Paulo, that is, the courses for youth and adults in primary and secondary school, which have been authorized by the government.

Article 2 of the same law affirms: "The education of youth and adults is intended for those who did not have access to school or continuity of study in primary or secondary education at the proper age." By explaining that "those who did not have access to or continuity of study in primary or secondary education at the proper age" have a right to education, the law includes millions of illiterate people, regardless of age, in an attempt to correct a mistake made repeatedly since the colonization of Brazil.

According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) - Census *data* (2000), published on December 2, 2003 - the illiteracy rate in Brazil fell from 17.2% in 1992 to 13.3% in 1999, indicating the existence of 24 million illiterate persons in the country.

Despite this decline, the Brazilian index can still be considered very high. That 24 million Brazilians do not have one of the basic conditions to be participating citizens of a literate society, we can conclude that they suffered some form of social exclusion, of educational exclusion. Although the government recognizes this situation, Education for Youths and Adults (EJA) has major problems, as much economic as pedagogical.

The federal government does not assume any financial responsibility for adult education. It has been helped by institutions that promote, in partnership with the state, the installation of services offered to all who have had no access to education, the possibility of integrating into the literate community of this country. On the other hand, there is also the pedagogical difficulty of developing *curriculum* for adult education. In each class that is formed, there are people with different interests and who have different physical conditions. A classroom of students ages 20 to 50 has a different profile of a class room with students 75 to 85 years old. One must consider the aging process to find out how the elderly learn, taking into consideration that with the aging process, there is a decline in cognitive functions.

According to Paiva (2001), adults must learn to read and write in today's world to be effective members of society. Teaching someone who has spent half his life without knowing how to write is to return to him a right that he has been denied for half his life, making his survival more difficult and subjecting him to conditions worse than those of his peers.

In this article, we aim to collect *data* about the needs of senior citizens ranging in age from 74 to 99 years old in regards to reading. This article will also discuss the elderly's integration process into the literate world, taking into account the aging process, the possibilities and limitations of old age and cultural diversity.

## 2. Research subjects

The report to be presented here was divided into two different visits in accordance with the events that occurred when in contact with the elderly at a nursing home in Marília, São Paulo in 2006. During the first visit, the participants engaged in an activity involving newspaper reading. In the second visit, a semi-structured interview about each of the participants' interest in reading was conducted.

It was not possible to study the entire group of residents of the nursing home due to many of their health conditions. Thus the research sample is a subset of the total number of residents, all of whom are women. To determine who would participate in the study, both the residents' physical health as well as willingness to participate in the interview were taken into consideration. Therefore, the research did not aim to generalize findings to apply to the entire population of residents of the nursing home in question. The nature of this research was qualitative and not quantitative; it did not prioritize the generalization of the results obtained by the sample, but merely the description, comprehension and interpretation of the *phenomena* observed with one specific group of women.

At first, the study began with only two elderly women who could read. In the second stage, we interviewed two women who could read and five who could not, for a total of seven interviewees. The *criterion* for the selection of subjects was previous contact between the subjects and the researcher some time ago when the researcher would lead activities during weekly visits. The elderly woman who could not get out of bed were interviewed in their rooms; the others were interviewed in the nursing home's garden.

The semi-structured interviews were recorded by the researcher during a three-hour meeting. This instrument was a way to compare these *data* recorded with those from the first visit. The choice of a semi-structured interview was due to the fact of providing a preliminary script and also the

freedom to add new questions in order to clarify important points for the study.

### **3. First visit: reading the newspaper (printed version)**

Often school is considered “the” place to learn how to read and write and it is forgotten that reading and writing, in the real world, go beyond the classroom. The texts produced for teaching students in school how to read and write are usually inadequate because they were produced outside of a social context. For Paiva (2001), schools receive students with the mentality that the students do not know anything when they take their seats in the classroom. This seems contradictory when referring to subjects who are embedded in a society based in and organized around written language. Adults are able to live in a literate world performing different ways of reading the world with only the resources that they have, for in certain situations, the subject is required to produce unconventional outputs or tactics for social survival. According to the author, educators must take advantage of the adults’ prior knowledge to improve their performance in the classroom. No adult is interested in knowing that "A pata nada"<sup>1</sup> because he is not in search of artificially-produced texts of linguistic code, but rather of texts that he finds in society because his inability to read such quotidian texts complicates his life. According to Paiva (2001, p.11), "[R]eading and the condition of being a reader in society, in the manner as has been normally required, asks for much more than merely learning the written code".

Motivated by the possibility of conducting reading activities that were truly relevant to the elderly and that would lead to the development of cognitive activities that would preserve their mental abilities, I made

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<sup>1</sup> N.T.: *A pata nada* means *The female duck swims*. It is a Brazilian idiomatic expression that means education done in a mechanistic manner.

available popular and obscure newspapers to begin with, as I believed that newspapers would be of interest to the subjects.

I proposed to develop an exercise around reading the (printed) newspaper, recognizing its great structure.

At the very beginning, all of the women said it was very good to read the newspaper and that they would like to participate in the activity. However, none of them actually participated. One woman looked at the photos and focused on one of an old man. She stroked the photo and read a few words from the photo's caption. As a researcher, I insisted that they read what was written so that we could then discuss what had been read. They asked questions about the headlines and photos to raise concerns or curiosity about all kinds of subjects covered in the newspaper. They ignored my proposals. Some elderly women read loudly or in a whisper, demonstrating their knowledge of decoding linguistic code, but when the moment arrived to discuss what had been read, the women fled from the conversation by asking about other topics related to my personal life, if I was married, had children, if I had had back pain before, i.e., issues related to the problems that they were currently living with. When I insisted and I asked again about what they had read, they merely repeated a few words they had read without actually applying any meaning to them. Gradually, I began asking about events that were happening in the country and in the city and no one was informed about these social events. Oblivious, they were living in a parallel world, the world of their nursing home.

The good intention of taking newspapers for the elderly to read was a failure. We must consider not only knowledge of linguistic code, but also that prior knowledge are resources so that reading comprehension occurs. Interaction with the social world was necessary in order to understand and want to know about it. The following questions arose from this first visit: What reading material interests the elderly? Secondly: What do senior citizens want to learn?

#### **4. Second moment: What the elderly want to learn**

Due to the participants' low interest in the newspaper activity, I chose to interview them and others who could not read about their needs and perspectives.

The interviews followed the script below:

Elderly participants who were literate	Elderly participants who were not literate
Do you know how to read? If yes, When did you learn? What do you like to read the most?	Do you know how to read? If not, Would you like to learn how to read? What type of reading material would you like to read?

**Table I – Script for interviews with the elderly**

We know that in order to teach someone to become literate, it is necessary to give meaning to linguistic code in social contexts. Reading cannot be understood as deciphering language code; understanding is the base, it is process, it is intention that compose the act of reading. Reading is a creator/producer of an immaterial object that exists in an ephemeral relationship between reader and text. Reading, thus understood, would not be outside of the subject, embodied in books or in other printed material: it is in human's relationship with the world of print. What is virtual and immaterial are created by the intention that the reader has to understand and the reader transforms because reading transforms his very way of thinking and organizing knowledge. The process of reading does not reach its highest point when the reader attributes, within the limits of his knowledge and skills, meanings to the text, but rather when it transforms the reader's thoughts and way of thinking because if it was the former, it would be of little service to the reader to learn how to read (ARENA, 2006, p.415).

In the relationship between teaching and learning, as much in normal classes as in adult education classes, students do not speak the same language as their teachers; teachers do not have the same prior knowledge because if they did, instruction would be as simple as transferring information from one to another, or rather, from teacher to student. Investigating the informal knowledge that adults have and identifying their interests is an essential factor to direct instruction of reading and writing. Teaching with materials that circulate in students' everyday lives such as supermarket flyers, lists of building material prices, cutting and sewing magazines that teach you how to trace patterns, or even cookbooks can be catalysts for reading development because they correspond with the needs and concerns of each adult in relation to the job market in which they live. With these materials, situations will arise that will enable students to ascribe meaning to the learning process and reading activities because they correspond with their own reality. For senior citizens who are no longer part of the job market, do not walk in the streets alone, do not visit their relatives and do not coexist in any way with the world outside the walls of their nursing home, what should we teach them? How do we reframe linguistic code to be relevant to them?

With this in mind, I will report the result of the interviews with the elderly who could not read, recording their explanations and desires. The names that appear do not correspond with their real names; they are fictional because the nursing home did not authorize disclosure of their real names. It was also not possible to confirm age, as I did not have access to the necessary documents.

Name and Age	Notes from the Interview
Ana 76	Did not respond to any questions. Said that her eyes were tired, she could not see well and decided to take a walk around the garden, abandoning the conversation. She felt self-conscious in responding that she did not know how to read.

Rosa 99	Does not know how to read, but says that she leafs through magazines to pass the time. Declares that she can not learn anymore because she can not stay focused on the letters but says that she has a strong desire to learn because if she could, she would read to "pass the time."
Sebastiana 74	Never learned to read, feels very lonely and would like to learn to read to "pass the time more quickly." She would like to read romance novels, "only very beautiful things."
Ermínia 82	Does not know how to read but went to school. She left school before she learned how to read. She would like to read anything but is not able to right now because her back hurts a lot.
Ernestina 77	Wants to learn how to read but can not. She was given a book of children's literature called <i>The Chicken with Golden Eggs</i> , but the person who gave it to her only read it to her once, which was not enough for her to learn how to read. She does not know what she would like to read. Says that she needs to know how to read first before she can know what she would like to read.

**Table II – Account of interviews with five elderly women who did not know how to read**

Given the responses from the interviews, it is possible to understand how the elderly lose with a lack of schooling at the time when they were in physical conditions more suitable for learning. This is an irreversible loss which can only be compensated with some exercises that reintegrate the elderly into social life so that they feel accepted by their community. This becomes very clear in the responses of two women, who said that reading would help them "pass the time." They can no longer help with simple chores and have difficulty with other types of manual activities such as painting, crocheting and other kinds of crafts. Reading would be a mental activity that would fill the time, prevent bad memories and thoughts, and develop cognitive activity necessary to prevent premature aging of the brain.

The result of the interview with Ms. Ernestina brings to light another interesting fact that makes us pause. Many people who attempt to bring the elderly into the literate world offer them materials that do not match their age. However, elderly behavior, due to a lack of social activities such as working and living with the family, return to infantile behaviors, such as playing with dolls, painting children's books, listening to fairy tales, playing memory and telling stories.

These activities are common in daily life at a nursing home. For seniors like the ones who participated in this study, the activities mentioned above would be very well received by them, but would not work with young people and adults who are in EJA. We found that EJA cannot be limited to a single *curriculum*. What can we possibly give back to these senior citizens who have lost one of their rights as citizens? To abandon them would be unjust. Fully reintegrating them into society would be utopian, but it would be possible to offer ways to improve their self-esteem and help them age with better care.

The table below records the story of two elderly women who can read.

Name and Age	Notes from the Interview
Maria 87	Knows how to read, but does not remember what she reads because her memory is slow. Shares that she reads every day because she had had this habit before she began to forget things. She read books from the library and others borrowed from friends. Nowadays she likes to read anything because she does not care what the content is, but rather is intrigued by the process of deciphering (what she reads).
Célia 75	Knows how to read. Reads every day. Enjoys all of the types of literature available at the nursing home: magazines, romance novels, stories about Jesus Christ. Makes the following declaration: "I feel sorry for the women who do not know how

[redacted] to read. Sometimes I tell them a story that I read and liked.”

**Table III – Account of interviews with two elderly women who know how to read.**

You can see in the report that the fact that these two women have had contact with reading before aging has helped them to have a better quality of life, even if reading is often used now to mitigate loneliness, a feeling expressed by all. Time passes quickly for anyone who is involved with a number of responsibilities, but for residents of a nursing home who no longer have normal physical conditions, time passes slowly. They schedule their day according to meal times. Reading provides company. These two women are able to handle time and solitude by reading. The first, despite her memory problems, keeps her mind busy by reading, even if she does not remember afterwards what she has read. For her, deciphering is to recognize that she has not totally lost the capacity of her memory. Tirelessly, she reads what she cannot remember and what she cannot even comment about. But the other woman, Miss Celia, makes reading her excuse to converse with other residents of the nursing home. Reading provides contact with others and escape from loneliness.

According to this sample, what do the elderly need? They need people who listen to them and offer activities that are not only of interest to them, but can also be done in accordance with any physical limitations they may have.

## **5. The need for a specific *curriculum***

Resolution SE, nº 1, January 12, 2001, provides for the organization of course *curricula* for youth and adults in public schools. Article 2 states:

The organization of *curricula* for youth and adults schools will comprise:

I - for all the subjects that comprise the National Common Base, in accordance with the distribution of curricular matrices Resolution SE No. 4/98 for elementary and middle school and 7/98 for high school.

Although we know that the law is flexible and allows for the adjustment of *curriculum* depending on the particular characteristics of a given class, there is legislation that suggests that there is a *curriculum* already prepared for a very different reality. Adopting a *curriculum* for the elderly implies the adoption of a series of criteria of biological, psychological and sociocultural natures.

The evidence that we can mention given the *data* collected explains and shows that for the elderly, the activity of reading is a means of establishing relationships with other individuals who live outside of the nursing home, which brings information of the world that the elderly can no longer participate in for different reasons. We realize that the elderly want and need to engage in a series of activities such as memory-building exercises, relationships with other people besides other residents of the nursing home, and learning choreography in small groups; all of these activities that can help improve their quality of life.

Older people can learn to compensate for some losses due to aging through strategies. In the case of memory problems, the deficits can be offset by reading materials of interest to them, as we saw in the interviews, from children's stories to literature about the history of Christ. It does not matter what they read; they must read to mitigate the aging process. According to Barbosa (2009, p.24), the proposed methodology for teaching the elderly deserves more attention:

The project, the teaching sequences and the text genres chosen would be selected by the teacher according to each student's needs, interests and desires. This means that the teacher's service to each student would not be individualized, having as a base a common assignment for all, but personalized for each student, according to his needs and interests, but converging to the collective construction of the work of building, organizing

and systematizing knowledge gained over the course of a lifetime.

The *data* presented here demonstrate that the education proposed by the course curriculum organization of EJA will not always be efficient for seniors. It is important to recognize, with the help of elders present in adult education classrooms, what and how they can and want to learn and what their physical possibilities are as a source of learning and cognitive development.

A number of factors can help promote well-being and quality of life in old age, such as physical and mental health, satisfaction, social competence, productivity, activity, social status, and continuity of social roles. EJA professionals bring to their students and older adults much more than an educational content to be taught, because the need to be liked and socially accepted in the reader community is what they most want.

## 6. Conclusion

From this panorama, we can draw two conclusions. The first is that EJA in Brazil is the real demonstration of the failures in the enforcement of the law. We must fight so that one day EJA is not a part of educational legislation, because everyone will receive education at the correct period of their lives.

The second conclusion is that EJA should consider that the word *adult* wants to, but cannot encompass *senior citizen*. This group needs a new *curriculum*, different from adults and youth who are in the world and in the job market. It is a unique group that deserves special attention, because these citizens were excluded from their rights and there remains little time to regain their dignity.

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