

Literacy and Illiteracy in Brazil: Some Reflections

Alfabetização e analfabetismo no Brasil: algumas reflexões

Alphabétisation et analphabétisme au Brésil: quelques réflexions

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ABSTRACT

This article presents some reflections on literacy in Brazil over the course of the nation's history. It will analyze Brazilian laws concerning literacy, novels, studies on literacy and teacher testimonials. The article serves to bring to light how little has been - and continues to be - offered to poor Brazilians.

Index terms: literacy, Brazil, poverty.

RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta algumas reflexões acerca da alfabetização no Brasil ao longo do tempo. Para tanto, utiliza a existência de leis a favor da alfabetização, passagens de romances, pesquisas feitas sobre a temática e ainda depoimentos de educadores. O artigo mostra a tendência do pouco que é oferecido aos mais pobres ao longo da história brasileira.

Palavras- chave: alfabetização, Brasil, pobreza.

RÉSUMÉ:

Cet article présente quelques réflexions concernant l'alphabétisation au Brésil au long du temps. De telle façon, il utilise l'existence de lois en faveur de l'alphabétisation, passages de romances, recherches faits sur cette thématique et encore des mots des éducateurs. L'article montre la tendance du peu qui est offert aux plus pauvres au long de l'histoire brésilienne.

Mots clés: alphabétisation, Brésil, pauvreté.

1. Introduction

In the past ...

The theme of literacy is on the agenda of important forums, agencies and authorities in Brazil. This interest is not a novelty, as we know well. As we look at the history of national education, we find clues about how this topic has been treated for a long time in this country. Saviani (2002) reminds us that on October 15, 1827, the first law that determined the creation of primary schools was enacted. It is in allusion to this date's importance that we celebrate "Teacher's Day" in Brazil.

This law stipulated that in established schools, teachers teach reading, writing, the four arithmetic operations, fractions, decimals and ratios; the more general concepts of practical geometry, national grammar standards, Christian morality, and the principles and doctrine of the apostolic Roman Catholic religion. (Article 6 of the Imperial Decree, 10/15/1827 in MOACYR, 1936)

In practice, however, this regulation did not guarantee the establishment of elementary schools *in all cities, towns and populated places* (BRASIL, 1827). In 1834, the Additional Act to the Constitution of the Empire uncharged the central government of overseeing primary and secondary schools, transferring this responsibility to the provincial governments. Even Saviani (2002) says that the result was a lack of investment in the opening of schools and the postponement of the population's acquisition of literacy.

Thus, we see that literacy as a theme and the fragility of official policies that favor the instruction of reading and writing for the entire population are not new to this country.

The present and its assessment tools

More recently, we have seen, read about and discussed assessment tools (ESTEBAN, 2008; OLIVEIRA ARAUJO, 2005, FREITAS, MALAVAZI BERTAGNA, 2006; FRANCO, 2006) regarding the disclosure of the low rates of reading and writing proficiency of Brazilian students. Among these tests, we will analyze: *Provinha Brasil*,¹ ENEM, SAEB, ENADE, PISA. Each one addresses a different group of students and therefore a specific age group that ranges from the first years of school to college, such as the National Survey of Student Performance (ENADE), which aims to assess higher education in Brazil and, since 2004, replaces the so-called *Provaão*.²

So far, the only level that has not undergone a formal evaluation is pre-school through first grade. We do not know how long children from zero to six years old will be spared, but it is certain that some countries have already adopted evaluation criteria for this stage of schooling. We also know that international organizations such as the World Bank have pressured governments for different quality indicators that can be officially established and, therefore, be some kind of control over the funding and financial support given by these funding agencies (see ROSEMBERG, 2001).

It seems that some time ago, the results of the evaluations related to different levels and stages of education in Brazil had reached the same

¹ N.T.: *Provinha Brasil* is a diagnostic evaluation about the literacy level of second grade students, which translates to “little test.”

² N.T.: Evaluation of university courses conducted between 1996 and 2003 by the Ministry of Education

conclusion: some Brazilian students do not comprehend what they read, which means that they are not proficient in the Portuguese language.

For example, the latest information published about the *Prova Brasil* – an evaluation for students in the 4th and 8th grades – shows that in 2007, in a comparison of students' mathematics and Portuguese performance, 4th grade students performed far below 8th graders, but for all grades, scores in mathematics were higher than in Portuguese. The average score (out of a maximum score of 350 points) achieved by students in the 4th grade (now called 5th grade) was 171.40 in Portuguese, while the national math test average stood at 198.14. If we analyze the *data* regarding the 8th grade (now called 9th grade), we find as the national average 228.93 in Portuguese, while the average in math was in 240.56. To summarize, our students scored worse in Portuguese than in math.

So once again, we return to the discussion of reading, writing and comprehension; *Prova Brasil* demonstrated that Portuguese is the weakest subject for Brazilian students. We return to the theme of literacy and seek to build upon it.

Even if official assessment tools can trigger numerous criticisms about their validity, efficiency and effectiveness, we cannot, however, deny the existence of the *data* generated nor what the data say. But therein lies the question: *What do they mean?* Or put in another way: *What do we "hear" from the data that we see?*

One of the things that we hear from the data is that the teaching of reading and writing remains a major challenge for schools and for the education system as a whole. The official figures released by the Ministry of Education - MEC - show almost universal basic education. The Ministry of Education through INEP (the National Institute of Studies and Research) shows rates of over 93% of school enrollment of children ages seven to 14 years old. The question is not access to school, but other factors. What then, are they?

If the problem at first glance is not having enough spots for all children in the education system, our *focus* turns to student attendance.

The *data* of the MEC also give us the scale of the problem. According to the INEP (2003), a total of 31,733,198 students are in elementary school, but this dropped sharply to 8,264,816 when we counted those who are in high school. The *data* show, therefore, that the problem is not to ensure students' access to primary school, but rather in the capacity of the schools, the education system and society in creating forms of permanence and continuity for Brazilian students in school.

Thus, the attendance rate of approximately 93% in elementary school falls to 49% when referring to high school. There are several studies trying to understand this state of affairs. Here we will not delve further into this discussion. We want to instead focus our analysis on possible clues that lead us to understand why so many boys and girls do not seem to appropriate the skills of reading and writing.

2. Why then are students not literate?

In seeking to understand the past (because it brings clues to understand the present), let us look toward academic literature. It is rich in examples of the treatment given to the teaching of language and how we address these dilemmas today.

When describing the pedagogical practices witnessed or experienced in school, some authors end up denouncing hegemonic paradigms and concepts of a time that, in some cases, seem not to have been left behind. Some of these practices and concepts still inhabit everyday literacy classes across the country, resulting in an education centered on copying, repetition and memorization. Of course, tests and evaluations remain the standard strategy to provide evidence of what was "learned." This type of education has long been denounced by Freire (1997, p. 27 and 28) and is what he calls the “

banking model” of education.³ Despite Freire’s criticism of the banking model for education, it is still the norm in Brazilian schools.

In analyzing Graciliano Ramos’ memoirs, we find what Freire’s exemplification denounces. In Graciliano’s books *Infância* (2003), first published in 1945, *Vidas Secas* and *Memórias do Cárcere*, among other important books, he describes his first encounter with letters as a child. Screams, threats, punishments and spankings accompanied the boy during classes that his father, a rude man who practised spartan didactics, insisted on administering. He was an unenthusiastic student. During his lessons, his literacy workbook seemed like nothing more than an excessive amount of printed material. The cover was adorned with three vertical stripes and filled with ordinary, yellow pages and poorly printed letters that crumbled in his fingers that were petrified of sweating too much. Graciliano tells us of his tortuous learning process of the letters of the alphabet. Just when he thought he had learned all of the letters, another one emerged in a sequence that seemed endless.

Finally, I managed to get acquainted with almost all of the letters. Then, twenty-five others were shown, which were different from the first and yet had the same names as them. Confusion, laziness, despair, an overwhelming desire to stop. The third letter of the alphabet came and also the fourth; confusion set in a horror of misunderstandings. Four signs with a single name. If I had become accustomed to uppercase letters, leaving lowercase letters to be learned later, perhaps I would not have been so destroyed. Large and small evils, printed and handwritten evils were thrown my way. A hell. (RAMOS, 2003, 1997)

What does Graciliano denounce with his story? What does this story reveal about how we, over time and still today, teach reading and writing?

³ N.T.: “Banking education” is Freire’s derisive term for the traditional style of education that believes that students are empty minds waiting to be filled with knowledge given to them by their teachers.

Recalling his own childhood, Graciliano (2003, p. 99) shares his world with us, which is not far removed from the world of many Brazilian students. In another episode, we find a child before the final pages of his *cartilha*.⁴ The text, painfully read by Graciliano, made no sense to him:

Laziness is the key to poverty. Who does not listen to advice rarely gets things right. Speak little and well, you will have⁵ (ter-te-ão) for someone.

Who was *Terteão*? What was he doing in the final pages of the *cartilha*?⁶ Graciliano could not answer his own questions and neither could his older sister. She too did not know who *Terteão* was. She had thought that he was a man. It was thus that Graciliano was thrown into the world of reading as a child. Ironically, Graciliano became a writer despite of (or perhaps because of) all that he lived through.

On the one hand, this is what leads us to critique and reject the concept of the banking school; on the other, it is what allows us to understand that, despite it, the student that experiences it is not doomed to fade away; despite banking education, which deforms the necessary creativity of the learner and the instructor, students exposed to it can learn - not because of the content knowledge being transferred - but because of the very process of learning, *dar a volta por cima*,⁷ as we say in popular language, and overcome authoritarianism and the epistemological error of banking education. (FREIRE, 1997, p. 27 and 28)

Graciliano managed to overcome his authoritarian education; he overcame being a functional illiterate to become a great writer. Many do not have the same fortunate fate - at least 16,295 million people in Brazil are unable to read and write even a simple note according to INEP (2003). If we include those with less than four years of schooling - called functional

⁴ N.T.: Didactic book for literacy, a workbook

⁵ N.T.: The verb form “will have” is the equivalent of the word *terteão*

⁶ N.T.: First book to learn write and read (didactical material), a workbook.

⁷ N.T.: Overcome, surpass

illiterates as Graciliano used to be - the total jumps to 33 million. The *data*, once again, from the Map of Illiteracy in Brazil, invite us to reflect.

The city of São Paulo is the infamous champion in absolute numbers: more than 383,000 people are denied the right to read and write. In Rio de Janeiro, there are almost 200,000 people.

In only 19 of the 5,507 municipalities in the country does the average resident's education correspond to eight years - the complete primary education (1st to 8th grade) - even though this level of education is a right granted by law to all.

The city with the highest level of schooling is Niterói, Rio de Janeiro. The average is 9.5 grades completed, whereas at Guaribas, in Piauí, we found the worst average, 1.1 years of study. But going to school is no guarantee of learning: 7.4% of adolescents ages 10 to 19 cannot read and write.

These younger boys and girls are still in school or have gone through it, which shows that our educational system continues to produce illiterate students. (INEP, 2003, p. 10)

But there are also those who attended school and left it for various reasons.

It is sad to note that in Brazil, 35% of illiterate people have attended school. The reasons for the failure of the country to teach its youth how read and write are varied: low-quality schools, especially in the poorest regions of the country and in the poorest neighborhoods of large cities; students having to work at a very young age to support their families; low levels of education among parents; unpreparedness of schools to deal with this population. (INEP, 2003, p. 10)

That is, all these *data* indicate that the debates about literacy have not been exhausted. The research and the investigations could not end our worries either. On the contrary, there is much to do and much remains to be asked.

Thus one wonders after looking at the *data* resulting from numerous studies (official or not): Who are the students who are failing so brutally at school? Who did very well in the different rating systems? And those who scored very poorly, who are they? Is failure or success in school equally distributed among different social classes?

The questions seem to be in the air when we look only at the statistical data isolated from the broader situation. We must look at the *data* and at the history of school failure *a contrapelo*⁸ as Benjamin (1996) invites us to, perhaps because he is wary of the conclusion that SAEB and PISA draw: failure is the fault of those who are in school. We need to denaturalize our point of view to ask ourselves, as Freire (2001) has always done: For what and for whom do we do what we do in education?

3. Final Thoughts

We have argued that we need to understand school failure in a more complex way (see MORIN, 1995), which means as the production of a social failure and not as the result of individual failure. To do this, all that is required is to look at those who do not learn to read and write – they are mostly among the poorest of the population. This means that school failure is not distributed democratically among all segments of the population, but is instead concentrated in the same social group: *coincidentally*, the poorest.

In a society where the ability to read and write represents power, those who do not know how to interpret a text or to write in their own words become second-class citizens (cf. LANDER, 2005). Speaking of illiteracy, therefore, produced inside or outside of school, is talking about a social injustice. Speaking of illiteracy is to denounce the injustices that produce inequality (FREIRE, 2001, p. 98).

⁸ N.T.: *Contrapelo* means against the normal flux.

Educating all students to become literate continues to be a challenging project. And this challenge is not just for the teacher or the child. This is – or should be – a collective, social challenge. However, in the world, there are about 113 million children out of school. Why do these numbers not make us indignant? Perhaps we forget that behind these numbers are names: Helena, Pedro, Teresa, Luís, Raquel, Sônia, João, Flávia, Amanda ... The numbers mask real subjects, people who have dreams and desires.

Thus, Garcia (2008, p. 566) says that we must (...) reflect in a collective and critical way about the social, cultural and political lives of those who go through school and come out, often at the end of compulsory schooling, without even knowing how to read and write.

Again, we find the idea that literacy entails political compromise more than mere technical or methodological commitment. For what, for whom, and why do we teach literacy? These are fundamental questions that link epistemological concepts that are, as Freire (1997) has said, policies. The methodological choices are a result of those.

Literacy is not taught to decode letters into sounds, though this remains a hegemonic conception about literacy. We are constantly inside the literacy process if we agree with Freire: the reading of the world is reading of the word. And reading of the word expands the reading of the world.

Serious educational policies that go beyond the mere identification of problems, but that actually offer solutions, are far from happening. Although it has been said many times, it must be said again that we need to ensure that children and young people receive a quality education, especially our poorest students. We need to admit that schools have poor infrastructure; there is a lack of teachers, security, libraries, school building maintenance and access to urban culture, among many other challenges.

For decades, discussions on literacy centered around determining the best teaching method. Schools were kept in limbo between the “synthetic” method – which focuses on the smallest units of language: letters, sounds and syllables – and the “analytic” method, which focuses on larger units: phrases, sentences and stories. Both methods claimed to be the solution to all problems related to language instruction. In the midst of this debate, the “eclectic” method emerged, promising to resolve all challenges facing both teachers and students by bringing together the best elements of both the synthetic and analytic methods. But this too was an illusory solution; the “battle of the methods” ended with the same problems with which it began, failing to produce any progress concerning literacy instruction.

In the eighties, with Emilia Ferreiro’s studies entering Brazil, we put up another *focus* in the literacy discussions. These discussions had as their central question *how the teacher teaches*. It hinged on *how children learn*. This change led to extensive research and discussion. The truth is that Ferreiro’s work has broadened our view of the reasons why children and young people are not literate. This author’s work, despite the widespread criticism it has received and its limitations, provokes us to think that the issue is complex. Simplifying the issue as we have done in the past has not done anything to improve matters.

The investment that families make in their children’s education also shows that school is seen as a place of empowerment and not just as a place of discrimination and exclusion. In light of this we might ask: Who benefits from seeing schools as only failure mills? Who is the producer and disseminator of research *data* that label the popular classes as guilty of their own failure? It is in whose interest that investigations are manufactured resulting in the subordination of the knowledge of the popular classes?

A dose of everyday life can contribute to putting into question once again the political and epistemological concepts that justify the choice of the

assessment as an accurate reference for evaluating the performance of school children ages six to eight years old in written language.

We present a piece by Michele Vicente da Silva (2007), presented to the Literacy Specialization Course for children from lower income groups at the Federal University at Fluminense. One of the teachers present in the course, here called Michele, recounts:

One morning, Adilson came to the room crying because he wanted to sleep and his mother wouldn't let him stay home. I talked to him about the importance of studying, that when he doesn't come to school, the classroom isn't the same. And he said that he couldn't take it anymore, and that he really wanted to kill his little sister. He said that he didn't sleep at night because he spent almost every night taking care of his sister and she cried a lot. And, the day before, he had been rocking her to sleep in his lap all night, and she just cried. She fell asleep at around five o'clock in the morning, which is when he could finally sleep as well. But soon, at six in the morning, his cousin had woken him up to go to school. When I asked him about his mother he replied that she was doing what she does every day, "She was passed out in bed, drunk as a skunk; she didn't even breastfeed her daughter." I knew then why the girl was crying all night: she must be hungry.

Later, the same teacher tells us:

The day after our conversation, trying to do what Paulo Freire (1997) calls the linking of language and reality by using "generative words" that draw from the "vocabulary universe" of the popular classes, expressing "[students'] actual language, their anxieties, their concerns, their claims, and their dreams," we decided to work with a different text, without telling anyone why. We proposed to the children that we write a cookbook, and suggested that the first recipe be baby formula. The children began talking and discussing and soon we were creating. Then we went to the kitchen and asked for one of the cooks to prepare the formula with the recipe that we had created. And our recipe was great, everyone liked it a lot, especially Adilson. And days later, he said he prepared a bottle of it for his sister and she could sleep at night.

Michele's account helps us to realize that the daily challenge of teaching and learning literacy can not be measured by any standardized test. What could possibly measure the academic performance of Adilson as a

result of the new and creative tools that his competent teacher used to simultaneously teach him literacy and address his difficult circumstances? With normal assessments, he would probably be identified as an incompetent student in reading and writing and he would have to go to remedial classes and what would that do for him or for the many other Adilsons?

Finally, we end this article with the following question: SAEB, *Provinha Brazil*, PISA, ENEM, and many other acronyms that we could add, what have all these "tests" done to help change schools?

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⁹N.T.: Added by the author on the moment of translation.

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