

Reading and literacy in Brazil: a search beyond polarization

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Abstract

This article presents reflections on the teaching of reading and literacy in Brazil, taking as its point of departure the current disputes among the so-called 'methods' and 'methodologies', or still, 'lines', 'philosophies', 'theories' of literacy and reading. The text weaves its arguments from some of the clashes and concerns taking place in this field of teaching in this first decade of the new millennium and, as an example, analyzes a document published by the Commission for Education and Culture of the Brazilian Federal House of Representatives entitled "Final report of the workgroup Child Literacy: the new paths", (Brasília, 2003). This analysis is taken as a reference to discuss the relation between the scientific production in the field of the teaching of reading and literacy, and its influence on public education. Towards the end of the text, the author explains his research perspective and describes specific suggestions to approach the issue of literacy and the teaching of reading in Brazil, emphasizing the singularities of the school in Brazil in which orality – if viewed in its authentic possibilities of use – can play a fundamental role in the teaching and learning of reading. The article's conclusion affirms that, many times, politics adopts this or that method as a way of evading the more complex responsibility of assuming literacy as an absolute priority of the State.

Keywords

Literacy – Reading – Literacy proficiency – Orality – Methods.

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Since the end of the 19th century, the teaching of reading skills has been subjected to a discursive polarity that opposes, on one side, the theoretical lines that emphasize the importance of the code in the process of learning to read (alphabetical, syllabic, and phonic method, among others), whose entrance in teaching happens after a rigid systematization of the initial phases of learning, and whose basic premise is that fluent reading results from the full command of the correlation between the minimal units of speech and those of writing. On the other side, there are the lines that highlight the previous meanings constructed by the reader and his/her abilities to make use of previous accumulated knowledge to monitor the reading process, whose entrance in teaching places value, among others, in culture, the construction of knowledge, and interactivity (global and ideographic methods; constructivism; social interactionism, among others).

In Brazil, since the early 1970s, the latter group has overcome the former, at least discursively (Barbosa, 1994). Important publications have intermingled and influenced the school discourse, and, although they have not achieved – as was their objective – a more effective penetration into the school actions, they at least had some of their versions taken as fundamental references to the creation of national and regional programs, from the PNLD – National Program for Textbooks, the National Curriculum Parameters, and regional Curriculum Guidelines, to more specific programs such as the PROFA – Program for the Formation of Literacy Teachers of the Ministry for Education and Culture.

Despite the importance of this renewal movement of the education, the national and regional assessments have clearly drawn a picture not quite unlike the one already visible in the 1970s and 1980s. Whilst the preponderance was then of the dropout, today the enormous reading difficulties and the gap between expected competences and series (or cycles) prevail. National assessments for 2003 (BRASIL, 2004) show that 55.4% of pupils had serious reading

problems, including 18.7% classified as having ‘very critical’ problems. According to SAEB (p. 34), such pupils “did not develop minimal reading abilities compatible with four years of schooling; they are not adequately literate; they cannot answer the questions of the exam”.

Another evaluation that caused negative impact on the Brazilian school system was that organized by OCDE – Organization for the Cooperation and Economic Development –, which became known as PISA – International Program for Student Assessment (OCDE-PISA, 2000)¹. Notwithstanding the questions raised about its efficacy (Marchetti, 2005) on account of the amplitude and the differences it somewhat overlooks, the results from this study had immense media impact due to the fact that it placed Brazil at the bottom of the list of 32 surveyed countries.

It is within this effervescent and polemical context that the Brazilian House of Representatives, via its Commission for Education, constituted a workgroup (henceforth denominated GT²) integrated by national and foreign experts, whose objective was to analyze the situation of literacy in Brazil, and to put forward “proposals to further the debate, policies and practices in our country” (Brasília, 2003, p. 8). The GT was composed by the following intellectuals: Marilyn Jaeger Adams (USA), Roger Beard (England), Fernando Capovilla (Brazil), Cláudia Cardoso-Martins (Brazil), Jean-Emile Gomberg (France), José Morais (Belgium) and João Batista Araújo e Oliveira (Brazil). Although three years have passed since the publication of its report, we decided to reflect upon it because the issue has unfolded in surprising ways through the media, and has influenced authorities (as we shall see ahead). In Brazil, the Minister for Education Fernando Haddad, in a recent interview, admits that this debate is necessary: “the whole world has made

1. In 2003 there was another PISA assessment (<http://www.inep.gov.br>); however, the 2000 assessment is the one that interests us because its main focus was on reading.

2. An acronym for the Portuguese expression for workgroup (*Grupo de Trabalho*).

this debate, so we think we should do it in Brazil as well”³. In France, an exciting debate has been going on since January this year, after a memo from the Ministry for Education that practically prohibits the use of the *ideovisual method* (in some interviews, the minister also attacks the ‘global method’)⁴. As we shall see further ahead, the context requires analysis and reflections and, in this sense, the report commissioned by the House of Representatives’ Commission constitutes an important official document, since it allows reflections both on the field of teaching and on the area of public policies.

In this first part we shall make a general analysis of the report. In the second part, we make considerations about the theoretical-practical Brazilian scene. We finalize the text by presenting our own perspectives on literacy and the teaching of reading.

Analyzing the Final report of the Workgroup, Child Literacy: the new paths

The first lines of the Introduction to the document, signed by congressman Gastão Vieira, disclose a political commitment to what supposedly constitutes an international movement of changes due to scientific progresses and, at the same time, a full acceptance of the main focus of the document, which centers on the merit of the studies about literacy and on Brazil’s situation of scientific backwardness in this field:

During the last 30 years, there has been a gigantic progress in the scientific knowledge about the process of learning to read and write, as well as in literacy methods. The studies about literacy have left the field of intuition, amateurship and empiricism, to acquire the standing of experimental science. (Brasília, 2003, p. 8)

The congressman expresses his hope in scientific knowledge about reading and cites as

examples the industrialized nations who have benefited from the “sciences of reading”, and he also laments the “various reasons that have prevented Brazil from gaining access to this knowledge and incorporating the experience of more successful countries” (p. 8).

The congressman’s focus, following that of the team of experts, moves away from the immense problems faced by the country, both in the field of education and in the socio-economic arena, and comes to rest solely upon the literacy practices, more precisely on the adoption of methodologies, always having as their safeguards the presumed advances “of the cognitive science of reading” (p. 10).

The synopsis of the report, which precedes the main text, already announces that “Brazil has not managed to teach her children to read and write – as evidenced by the performance of pupils in subsequent grades”⁵. From beginning to end, the report will refer recurrently to the “scientifically proved”, to the “irrefutable evidences” showed by the “modern cognitive science”, whose researches would have employed advanced technological procedures going from MRI (Magnetic Resonance Image) functional brain mapping to the genetic analysis of dyslexia, lines very usual to proponents of the phonic method and of an innatist conception of dyslexia, whose manuals containing the novelties of neurosciences discoveries are being translated into Brazilian Portuguese (Shaywitz, 2006; Snowling e Stackhouse, 2004).

Based on these sciences, the authors of the report label their opponents and all other lines of research and educational intervention as amateurship, grotesque errors, improvisations and ideological attempts:

3. Folha de São Paulo, 11th February 2006, Caderno Cotidiano.

4. The debate can be followed on the French site: <http://www.cafepedagogique.net> (last accessed on 5th March 2006).

5. The Report considers the 2001 national assessment carried out by SAEB, in which the performance of pupils of the 4th grade is still poorer (22.2% were classified as ‘very critical’).

The problem is that an eminently political or ideological posture has led many countries – and continues to lead in Brazil – to a rejection of objective and scientific evidence about how children learn to read. (Brasília, 2003, p. 15-16)

When describing its work methodology, the GT claims to assume a neutral and scientific perspective, emphasizing that its consensual interventions stand above ideology and politics. It cites the example of other countries, such as the USA, France and England, that would have managed to produce documents and syntheses about the state-of-the-art in the field of reading, so as to give to their educational policies objective views and, in the local context, refers to the initiative of the Brazilian Parliament as “an important step in this direction” (p. 16). After these examples, it describes a picture that highlights the French example – the ONL (*Observatoire National de la Lecture*) – an entity created in 1995 with the objective of supporting the French Ministry for Education. It then mentions the research methodologies on which this approach is based, and cites two other countries that have been absorbing these changes: England and the USA.

In its Chapter IV, national teaching plans and entities from the three countries example are taken as references with the objective of strengthening the argument put forward by the GT in favor of the superiority of the phonic method. The NSL – National Literacy Strategy from England, and the NRP – National Reading Panel from the USA, next to the ONL, enter stage to exemplify the emergence of new plans and organizations, which are being specifically created to respond to two demands: to combat the global and/or ideovisual methods, and to present the phonic methodology as the solution to the problem of teaching to read.

Four reasons are presented to justify the choice of these three countries as examples: 1. they are countries with complex educational systems; 2. they still face challenges and

difficulties to teach to read and write; 3. they have been promoting changes in their teaching programs; 4. four of the main authors of the report come from these countries. An important piece of information that should perhaps have been pointed out in the report is the obvious fact that all those four international representatives subscribe to the same theoretical line: Adams, Beard, Gomberg, and Morais are historical proponents of the traditional phonic method or of closely related methodologies – in their own countries they are in clear rise after significant discursive victories, they have formed discourse societies, have taken on politics and, at the moment, work with their respective governments.

There are three other researchers in the group that support this same trend. The fact that the experts are all from the same group might explain the recurrence of the phonic paradigm and the abundance of references to these authors, and might give to this report a distinct flavor of political and ideological struggle, and not the character of a neutral and scientific piece of work, as proclaimed in its pages.

Two observations should also be made with respect to the constitution of the GT and to the choice of the three countries of reference. First, the endogeneity of the group does not agree with the scientific rigor claimed for the contents of the report. Second, this kind of workgroup differs markedly from the one organized in France with the same objective: a consensus conference, organized by PIREF - Programme Initiatif de Recherche en Education et Formation (2003) - , in which there were participants from various currents, as we shall see later on.

Another relevant point that characterizes the endogenous strategy of the GT concerns the places and representations projected by the authors, how they situate the problems to be tackled, and how they construct the image of their interlocutors. Note the following passage:

The present report was requested by the House of Representatives Commission for

Education. It represents a contribution from the Parliament to help associating Brazil with the efforts of the international community of researchers, educators, and countries committed to the adoption of scientific criteria as a basis for the development of literacy policies and practices. (Brasilia, 2003, p. 13)

It can be noticed in the lines above that the group, even with its three Brazilians, stands in imaginary isolation, seeing themselves as the single community of international researchers, thereby relegating to a limbo all Brazilian researchers that keep other epistemological commitments and other international liaisons. The document wants to lead the reader to believe in the existence of a single international community, which is the carrier of the true scientific research – it is clear that the use of the definite article in “the community” is intentional, instead of “a community” or “this or that community”. The claim of isolation makes the group of authors of the text to coincide with “the community” of scientists holders of the truth, putting in evidence certain rigidity of discourse that comes close to intolerance. The excerpt below illustrates amply this search for legitimacy:

It is important to highlight that the current researches about reading follow the same rules applicable to the rest of experimental sciences, such as Physics and Biology. The international scientific community in this area includes hundreds of researchers organized in countless scientific institutions and with publications in technical journals that submit articles to referees before publication. Most of these publications are referenced in the citations presented in the final section (References). The creation of SSSR (Society for the Scientific Study of Reading) in 1990 is a landmark in the institutionalization of the new science of reading. (p. 17)

The interdiscourse here presupposed structures a struggle as a non-scientific discourse, that which can be authorized, that which does not gather enough credibility to influence public policies.

This intention is exhaustively enunciated in several other parts of the text, to the point that the shrewd reader is led to inquire for the motivation of this exaggerated search for legitimacy. A possible explanation is the struggle strategy that can be discerned in this kind of discursive setup: the group needs to displace the other trend currently in power which, in the Brazilian case, would be the constructivist and social interactionist, the authors of Brazilian official documents and programs (National Curriculum Parameters, PROFA – Program for Adult Literacy, PNLD – National Program for Textbooks, and other official documents of the last ten years) and of the machinery of didactic manuals.

The text of the report is constructed so as to bring the reader to the conclusion that exists one line of research which is absolutely trustworthy, supposedly tested and approved by high-level researchers, and from whose context Brazilian researchers and educators would not be part; and, moreover, it tries to show that these studies have universal validity, that is, they can be globalized.

In chapter II, the document presents the group’s conception of reading, bringing fragments of works by Adams and Morais. Reading is defined as the “ability to extract the pronunciation and meaning of a word from graphic signals” (Brasilia 2003, p. 20). In this context, the document shows an excerpt from one of Morais’ works, which uses as a kind of didactic allegory the episode of the blindness of English poet Milton, whose daughters, even without understanding Greek, read Greek texts to him, who could understand them. To Morais, the poet was not practicing reading, only his daughters did, since they managed to extract from the Greek characters the pronunciation, even without understanding

their meaning. The father, hearing the sound of the Greek language, carried out only the act of understanding. With this example the authors draw an absolute distinction between reading and understanding, and give shape to the main contest of the chapter, opposing the equation “reading is understanding” to the formula “reading to understand” (p. 21).

In these antagonisms, the document presents its criticisms to the concept of *whole language* – translated in Brazil and publicized as “*linguagem integral*” or, in the case of reading, as “*leitura significativa*” – of Goodman (1997) and Smith (1999), seeking to show to Brazilians that the scientific evidence presented by Adams and others reduce the ideas of those two authors to ideology, to political positions deprived of scientific value (Brasília, 2003, p. 30). Repeating exhaustively that the decoding occupies center stage in learning to read, the state-of-the-art denies the main theoretical influences that Brazilian educators received in the last twenty years, mentioning four authors – Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner and Flavel – as authors from the past, whose ideas have been swept away by “new evidence about language’s neuroanatomical substrata that have revolutionized the way of doing research in this field” (pp. 24-25). Such authors, along with others that are directly or indirectly criticized in the report (Jean Foucambert, Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky, Paulo Freire, and many others from various other sciences), have exerted enormous influence upon the production of many Brazilian intellectuals, particularly of those in the field of literacy who refuse to give primacy to the exhaustive and methodic command of minimal units of writing or language, influences that can be observed in Brazil, among so many works, in Abaurre (1997), Bajard (1999), Barbosa (1994), Franchi (2001), Geraldi (1997), Kleiman (1995), Kramer (2001), Marcuschi (1999), Rojo (1998), Silva (1993), Smolka (2003), and Tfouni (1997) – we are aware of the fact that these authors do not form a consensual assemblage, nor do they

belong to the same sciences or theoretical sources; however, they have in common the fact that they do not accept that the act of reading or even of learning to read consists in essence of dealing solely with the minor elements of the process (phonemes, syllables, graphemes etc).

According to the report, such theoretical ramifications would be outdated and without scientific value. The discourse goes on trying to persuade on the basis of a presupposition that the readers in a developing country like Brazil must recognize the scientific supremacy of the developed nations, and accept beforehand the idea that there is a clear gap between these two blocks:

The topics included here do not just approach the more fundamental questions of literacy, but can also help to analyze and understand the distance that separates the scientific evidence available in the world from the more usual literacy practices in Brazil. (Brasília, 2003, p. 23)

Proceeding in the construction of its discursive legitimacy, the group, in several parts of the report, exhibits its blatant commitment to the methods of the exact sciences:

Based on well-established scientific facts, it has been possible to derive robust ideas for the teaching of reading and for the reeducation of people with reading difficulties. The American Psychological Society – APS published in its journal *Observer* (volume 13, July-August 2002) a report entitled “How psychological science informs us about the teaching of reading”. This report points out that in the New Cognitive Science of Reading the principle that the phonological awareness is the most important predictor of success in reading has a strength equivalent to that of the concept of gravitation in Physics. (p. 18)

Always emphasizing the scientific lineage of its arguments and truths, the document also

presents the defense of the “phonic methods”, showing that they are “the most often used in developed countries” (p. 59). Bringing back the criticisms normally made against the phonic method by the other perspectives, it tries to present, point by point, its counter-arguments and then immediately reaffirms that “the phonic methods prove superior to the rest. The instruction in phonics must be systematic and not accidental”. (p. 63)

In its chapter IV, when presenting the “experience from other countries”, the authors recreate the opposition between the currents, making clear the dispute between the lines of research, with the participation of governments, ministries, entities and plans expressly created to establish interfaces with the government and take ideological and logistic control of school systems. In the three countries, the report attempts to point out common aspects:

- Government and entities especially created to face the crisis require more control over the school system, interfere in curricula and programs, invest in a detailed control of the production of didactic material and in the teacher education program, always having as their reference a single theoretical orientation, the phonic;
- Governments end up recognizing the poles of the struggle between the methods and, despite being sometimes unable to assume directly a single methodology, point out favorably to the phonic method;
- There is always a workgroup that is considered above ideological conflicts, characterized as of high scientific level, which produces a report revealing the causes of school failure, and electing the phonic methodology as the most adequate to the process of literacy and the teaching of reading;
- Assessments become more detailed, involving also the initial grades;
- In general, the idea of assessment is associated to the medical diagnostic of dyslexia,

and eventually emphasizes that the preparation for writing (teaching of phonics) and the diagnostics of possible learning problems must come at an earlier stage of the child’s life (around the age of five) in order to check learning disorders and other problems.

Although the report presents its data and builds its arguments from them, its advertising drive becomes evident in the very structure of the text. In the first chapter, the State-of-the-Art, elaborated, according to the authors, with scientific rigor, shows that the lines committed to the *whole language* and with constructivism or social interactionism were overtaken by recent scientific evidence – which recognize, always in “unequivocal manner”, that the phonic method is superior and more efficient to the school teaching of reading and writing. The following chapter presents the three countries that had problems with non-scientific methodologies, and which make it clear that there is always a way ahead, which is also evidenced in the reports they are producing: a committee of scientists unfettered by ideologies, a report scientifically elaborated, and measures to be taken by the governments.

It is clear to see that the constant preoccupation in the report is the search for legitimacy. If the scientists are accepted as the most prominent from the international community (chapters I and II), if the experiences of their countries were accepted as universal trends (chapter IV), then the analysis of the Brazilian situation carried out by the group (chapter V) and the conclusions and recommendations (chapter VI) will be unquestionable and will be able to influence directly the public policies.

The exaggeration of this search for legitimacy, in special that of José Morais, can also be observed in a French document produced by the ONL (a body that rivals with the French Association for Reading – AFL), *L'évolution de l'enseignement de la lecture en France, depuis dix ans*, in which Bernard

Cerquiglini, president of ONL, when introducing the participants of the January 2004 Seminars, presents José Morais as advisor to President Lula in Brazil (ONL, 2004, p. 8).

Notwithstanding obscure points in the reports about the situation of each country, such as reactions from local intellectuals and even from school systems (reactions that are all regarded by the GT as having purely ideological motivations) and results that did not materialize in the new assessments (this can be seen, for example, in ONL's own reports⁶) the argumentation goes on affirming and reaffirming that the application of the phonic methodology has been responsible for positive changes in the data coming from these assessments. From the set of governmental interventions in these three countries – which range from gradual increases in investment in initial grades to the reorganization of the structure of the school systems – the authors abstract only the efficacy of the phonic method and the rejection of other methodologies as elements to be considered by the reader.

To establish a relevant contrast to these arguments, we can here mention some of the conclusions of the consensus conference organized in France by PIREF about teaching practices and possible adoption of methods in the teaching of reading. The overall result of the conference was not the choice of a method or the election of phonic activities as the hub of the process of teaching how to read. On the contrary, the experts' recommendation was that the work with the code should be combined with activities that recover the meaning, and they also suggest many other activities about language, comprehension and textual production – they make it clear that the work with the code is important, but not sufficient. The only method that is not recommended is the “ideovisual, because it refuses to work with the grapheme-phoneme correspondence” (PIREF, 2003, p. 3). Still, important authors in that conference, such as Goigoux (2003), see positive elements in Foucambert's conception, and comment that

despite not being used in France in pure form, it has exerted positive influences, even on the 2002 program that rejects it (p. 10–11).

Still on the French case, at the beginning of this year the Minister for Education Gilles de Robien sent a memo (No 2006-003 du 3-12006⁷) reiterating this prohibition and also including in the list of excluded what he calls “global method” (here, despite ambiguities, the minister possible refers to the influences from Kenneth Goodman and Frank Smith, and may include the methodologies of Decroly, Frenet, and other influences that do not assume directly the decoding as the center of the literacy process). In his argumentation in interviews to big newspapers⁸, Robien states that he made this decision based on consensual scientific evidence that attributes the cause of the increase in the number of cases of dyslexia to the global methods of teaching.

The memo and interviews generated polemics, petitions, interviews, and articles by experts. Ouzoulias (2006), taking the date of the memo as a starting point to a fine irony, entitles his article “La révolution du 3 Janvier ou le syndrome de la tortue de Floride”, in which he demonstrates the plurality of approaches that can lie behind the minister's condemnation (*whole language, whole word, ideovisual method*), and emphasizes that it is not productive for the French researchers and educators to substantiate their conclusions with comparisons with what goes on in England and the USA, since there are huge differences between the languages (in the phoneme-grapheme correlation) and in the very theoretical-practical context of education of each country – his conclusion is quite evident in a subtitle of his article: “Deux langues, deux écritures, deux didactiques”.

Goigoux (2003) also reinforces what had already been presented at the consensus

6. On www.inrp.fr/onl (last accessed October 2005) it can be seen that the persistent fraction of 15% of pupils regarded as weak in reading at the end of cycle II continues at the same level.

7. Ministère de l'éducation nationale, de l'enseignement supérieur de la recherche.

8. The Minister's statements can be examined on www.cafepedagogique.net.

conference, reaffirming that there is no scientific proof that can ensure the superiority of this of that method in the field of reading and literacy.

Even Frank Ramus⁹, an expert in neuroscience linked to the ONL, and therefore an advocate of the systematic teaching of the grapheme-phoneme correlation, shows some reservation when speaking of teaching methods inspired by neuroscience: “Je maintiens que ces recherches en neurosciences n’ont pour l’instant aucune application aussi directe à l’éducation”¹⁰. He nevertheless agrees with the studies of the “National Reading Panel” which, when analyzing various teaching methods, avows the superiority of the phonic methodologies. Even so, the French researcher remarks what is explicit in the NRP: that phonic activities must be present from the start of the teaching of reading, but not in isolation, since phonics is but one component amongst others that are also necessary. Here and in the NRP it can be noticed that the phonic version for Brazil does not admit such relativism. Indeed, Bajard (2006, p. 2), when comparing the Brazilian report with one of the documents of the French ONL, observes this difference:

Despite the participation of José Morais in the writing of both texts, the style of the French texts is different from the Brazilian report. *La lecture et son apprentissage* is not filled with expressions such as the following ones, present in the Report presented to the House of Representatives: “all these studies adopt well-established scientific procedures, recognized by the international community” (Brasília, 2003, p. 17); “[Morais’] study broke away from the world of speculation and amateurship, (p. 17), apart from similar expressions that seem to have been chosen with the purpose of generating confrontation and spread polemic.

Moving ahead in the analysis of the report, chapter IV presupposes, when dealing with the Brazilian case, that the reader should by then be ready to accept that what he/she has in

his/her hands is a scientific piece constructed above ideological intentions; and so, before so many evidences, the reader will eventually admit that the problems revealed by the SAEB assessments are the complete responsibility of the Brazilian constructivists.

Starting from the assessments of SAEB and PISA, the report also finds that “Brazil faces large difficulties to teach her pupils to read and write and thus afford them adequate schooling” (Brasília, 2003, p. 112), and that there are no data in the country “that can attest to the existence of efficacious literacy programs in the public municipal school systems” (p. 112).

Even though it notes – in just three lines (p. 113) – that there is a diversity of causes for the difficulties in the field of literacy in Brazil, the document rejects at once that the problems can be attributed to the “question of poverty” or to “learning disorders”. Because such problems are too complex to be evaluated by a commission of this kind, the GT’s attention focuses on “literacy policies and practices associated to these results”.

Having then focused on the problem that interests the GT, the attention turns now to the National Curriculum Parameters (PCN). The report mentions the remarkable influence that the Brazilian document exerts over the municipal and state Secretariats for Education, over the teacher education programs, and over textbooks.

By virtue of this influence, the report dedicated several pages to the analysis of the document. As was the case with the three countries, the ‘Brazilian’ GT will also detect the influences of Goodman and Smith’s *whole language*, and also of Emilia Ferreiro’s constructivism, particularly of the book *A psicogênese da língua escrita* [The psychogenesis of written language] (Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1986). But in the case of Brazil, the authors

9. <http://education.devenir.free.fr/Lecture.htm#ramus>.

10. http://education.devenir.free.fr/Lecture.htm#_edn3 (accessed on 5th March 2006).

detect in the pages of the PCN the convergence of these three currents: genetic psychology, social interactionism, and meaningful reading. From the four documents that comprise the PCN, attention will focus only on the ones related to the first two cycles, since these are the ones dealing with literacy.

After some segments defining the theoretical assumptions of the Brazilian document, highlighting the contrasts it proposes with respect to the perspectives that emphasize the code and the decoding, the report examines the secretariats and teacher education programs, giving special attention to the influences from the PCN and those coming from Brazilian universities, stressing that these are outdated, distant from the state-of-the-art of “most developed countries” (p. 131). It regrets the absence of evaluation programs and of a wider consensus about the scientific methodologies that define and conceptualize literacy.

Following the example of the argumentation posed by Adams against the works of Goodman and Smith in the USA, the authors here set out to do the same with the influence of Emilia Ferreiro, dispensing to *A psicogênese da língua escrita* [The psychogenesis of written language] “a more detailed treatment to demonstrate how science evolves, and how scientific evidence forces researchers to reformulate their theories and hypotheses – instead of repeating them as articles of faith” (p. 132).

In the final pages of this chapter, the workgroup compares Brazil to other countries, both with respect to the proposals contained in the PCN and in other official documents, and with respect to guidelines, and perspectives for teacher education and school assessment. The conclusion makes suggestions, roughly along the lines of the critiques already made in the three countries chosen as examples: greater control of education systems; more rigorous definition of guidelines and, above all, of concepts and strategies related to the work of the teacher and to the demands of child literacy

– definitions that, according to the GT, should always consider “scientific criteria and not pedagogical philosophies” (p. 136) –; intensive use of the phonic methodology; use of textbooks preferably controlled by the Ministry for Education; teacher education programs with more mechanisms of quality control (in this topic the group goes as far as suggesting an ‘essential’ bibliography with the presence of several proponents of the phonic method, two of them members of the GT: Adam and Beard).

Chapter VI – “Conclusions and recommendations” finishes the report with the GT reiterating the comparison between Brazil and the three countries, and repeating statements that were made at the outset, stressing the importance of scientific research, control mechanisms, more detailed curricula and, above all, making it clear that Brazil does not have the necessary scientific knowledge in the field of literacy:

The first and more important step consists in opening the dialogue of Brazilian authorities and academic community with other countries and with the international academic community. Brazil shall certainly have much to gain from studying, knowing, understanding and adopting a view of literacy compatible with the current state of the knowledge on the subject. This is not a simple task and requires reviewing positions and commitments, but it is an obligation of all those responsible for the production and management of knowledge. The scientific knowledge on literacy is dialectical and evolves, expands, and becomes more sophisticated. This is a particularly promising moment, considering that the new Federal and State governments are freer to review their positions. As to the academic community, it should bring itself up to date and offer updated information to the pupils – it is more than anything else, a moral and professional duty. (p. 146)

The authors still suggest the creation of non-governmental organizations like the ones created in England, France and the USA. They finish the document by saying that the authors foresee criticisms of the report, since this was also the case in other countries in which the phonic method (as in Brazil) always provokes negative reactions inspired by philosophies, ideologies and interests.

Faced with these statements, a reflection of an epistemological nature is called for. Commenting on empiricists and behaviorists, Piatelli-Palmarini (1983) observes that their theories have an attractive cover, but that in heuristic terms almost always “are wrecked against the reefs of an excessively stingy ontology” (p. 9), since they adopt criteria that restrict the complexity of the research object and make the explicative model quite limited, almost insignificant before that vast array of other phenomena that compose it. The scientific view of the proponents of the phonic method can be revisited from this interpretation of Piatelli-Palmarini’s, that is, the reduction of the learning of reading to the phenomenon of decoding produces a curtailment of the essential elements of the process, and also evinces its dangerous epistemological stinginess. Let us examine one of the moments in which the authors highlight the essential elements of the process of learning to read and write, transcribed from the National Reading Panel (Brasília, 2003, p. 23):

It is a well-established scientific fact that learning to read and write requires:

- Understanding the alphabetical principle.
- Learning the correspondences between graphemes and phonemes.
- Segmenting orthographic sequences of written words into graphemes.
- Segmenting phonological sequences of spoken words into phonemes.
- Using rules of grapheme-phoneme correspondence to decode information (Adams, 1990; Adams, Treiman e Pressley, 1997; Snow, 1998; National Reading Panel, 1998).

Although the authors did recognize that many other aspects of reading and writing were left aside because of the specificity of the report, they reaffirm that the ones listed above by NRP are the most fundamental. Perhaps what raised criticism and reactions in all countries where implementation of the method has been attempted were not ideological and political motivations, as the proponents of the phonocentrism allege exhaustively throughout the report, but precisely this reduction of the complexity of their field of expertise. The state-of-the-art of cognitive psychology that gives support to the phonic method, when translated into practice, adds very little to the well-known tradition of the so-called alphabetical or syllabic methods. What they always advertise as novelties are the supposed scientific proofs they bring in from neurobiology and genetics. In Snowling and Stackhouse (2004) and Shaywitz (2006) we can detect a trend similar to that of the report, with a discourse preaching the news and advances of science in the treatment of dyslexia and, in the end, offering suggestions of diagnostics and activities to schools and parents which, by and large, do not differ significantly from those practiced in the 1960s (Jadoulle, 1966). The epistemological stinginess and the narrow focus on decoding reedit the solutions present in traditional primers, the usual Cartesian schema: start from smaller difficulty (start with the easier syllables), use a rigorous order (sequences of syllabic families in order of difficulty), reduce subjective differences, erase virtually all kinds of differences.

The complexity of the Brazilian demands and the difficulties to transpose the theoretical knowledge into practices

In general, researchers confronted with the complexity of the Brazilian demand see themselves forced to elaborate theoretical syntheses involving several authors, or even several sciences, because they realize the big

problems caused by narrowing the focus of the educative relation down to a single aspect. The questions below represent a significant part of the anxieties of a researcher or even of an educator before the complexities that the teaching of reading and writing poses to each educator:

It was precisely the need to analyze the context, to think about literacy (or about the development/teaching/acquisition of writing) in terms of interaction and interlocution, that I made clear throughout these years of work – to situate this pedagogical task in its technical, practical context, but above all in its theoretical and political context. Embedded in this need, the search for what was relevant and significant. That is, in the diversity of methods, in the differences among practices, in the dispersion of interests, in the attribution of values, in the contingency of situations and moments, what really matters? Can we ascertain or determine this? (Smolka, 2003, p. 29)

It is clear that the author sees before her a diversity of elements that ranges from nomenclature, which already announces possibilities of dialogues with various trends, to a field which is complex to define and “ascertain”.

But the proponents of the phonic method smooth out the field, eliminate the differences, reduce the field of the teaching of reading to schooling and to a set of techniques.

When analyzing the trends in Brazil, they fix their attention on a confrontation between methods, instead of analyzing the complexity that some lines have achieved, especially in the last decades. Even the influences of the ideovisual perspectives and those of the meaningful reading (Goodman, Smith, Foucambert), from constructivists (Piaget, Emilia Ferreiro), from the social interactionists (Vygostsky, Lúria), and those from Paulo Freire

did not happen solely in the field of language. In the 1980s and 1990s these influences were recombined with others originated in several interdisciplinary possibilities: in Sociolinguistics (for example, coming from the Labovian tradition of extreme intertextuality with the work of authors such as Bourdieu, Snyders, and others, as we can see in Soares, 1989); in the French Discourse Analysis and in M. Bakhtin's Enunciation Theory, which can be seen in Geraldi (1997), Smolka (2003), Kramer (2001), Kleiman (1995), Abaurre (1991), Rojo (1998), Orlandi (1996) and many others. Perhaps the difficulties the authors of the Report point out in the PCN, which can indeed be detected, are a result of an attempt to elaborate sweeping theoretical syntheses with the intention of avoiding a restrictive model centered only on one of the aspects of teaching.

Apart from this theoretical intercrossing, there is also the emergence of new studies in the field of the acquisition of spoken language that open important perspectives to literacy and teaching. One example is the fruitful approximation between Linguistics, Psychoanalysis, and Education, whose conceptions of language, tongue, and writing assume a constitutive link with the concept of unconscious. Promising examples are the works of Lemos (1992), Castro (1996), Lier-de-Vito (1998), Bosco (2002), and Lemos (2002) – for this perspective, for example, the idea of phonological awareness or even the conception of self-centered subject seen in the report would not escape heavy criticism.

If a scientific consensus is necessary to allow educators and policymakers to have suggestions of programs and curricula in a collective effort to face the complex demands in Brazil, it is fundamental that it results from a wider articulation that considers the dialectical movement typical of contemporary scientific knowledge which, except in rare occasions, pays homage to interdisciplinarity, respects heterogeneity and the complexity of processes and cultural diversities. And it is important that

the search for this consensus be part of a wide plan that make literacy and the teaching of reading an absolute priority in Brazil.

The group of experts chosen by the House of Representatives Commission for Education and Culture represents only one of the possible perspectives in the field of reading and literacy. In this sense, the recent criticism made by Ouzoulias (2006) about the danger of importing Anglo-Saxon researches into France can, *a fortiori*, be applied to Brazil: a complex country, whose language – Brazilian Portuguese – possesses a phonetic-phonological system very different from English – if the British or North American student experiences immense difficulties to correlate graphemes and phonemes (or phones) and, because of that, needs systematic training in phonics, the Brazilian pupil seems to do well in activities that put the phonetic-phonological dynamics of the language into play from the use of integral texts of his/her culture, above all those genres that seem to have been specially prepared by culture so that the child can play with the disassembly of words. The formulae of choice, the game of *revestrés*, the language of the “P”, the tongue-twisters, the *mnemonias* (a special type of nursery rhymes), and so many other ludic genres present in the Brazilian cultural diversity already bring in them the essential elements of a writing.

Texts of oral origin allow excellent strategies of literacy and subjective involvement with the universe of reading. It is possible, for example, to classify the tongue-twisters, the formulae of choice, the guessing rhymes, and the nursery rhymes according to the type of difficulty that the literacy process will face at the moment. If we want to deal with consonant clusters, we can play orally with a tongue-twister – for example: “*troque o trinco e traga o troco*” – pronouncing it in two different ways: with the consonant cluster pronounced, or reduced to the canonical syllable: “*toque o trinco e taga o toco*” (children recognize there, in the missing /r/, that the other child still has

difficulties of speech, and ends up noticing the consonant cluster). When performing the passage to writing using a script similar to the one showed here, we have a pairing that evinces the form and function of the consonant cluster.

There are many other games that allow associating body motions to the separation of vocabulary or syllabic units (a few examples: to jump rope while saying texts, to throw a ball at a wall while saying a text, formulae of choice, some rhymes and *mnemonias*) – at this point linguistics and kinesiology meet and, in general, help very much to bring to the game the subjects that present analytical difficulties with respect to segmentation.

We insist that in orality there are already the fundamental elements of a writing (Belintane, 2005), that is, that the aesthetics that allows the memorizing and the game are fundamental elements not just for the pupil to accept the game of “glue-unglue” of the syllabic and phonematic intermittency, but also to put into play a subjectivity that enjoys the discovery of a space of movement among oral texts, and between these and the written texts, and more generally, between the segmentable and analyzable elements of the speech and written language, be they phones, syllables, graphemes, morphemes, phrases, intra- and intertextual references etc. In Belintane (2006), we showed the effect of the guessing rhymes on memory, and we discussed the idea of an “inter-text subjectivity” that analyzes form and meaning at the same time.

Within this context of teaching, it is possible and advisable to use the conceptions of Emília Ferreiro and the activities with syllabic families (with oral activities, copy, dictations etc). Note that starting from the oral, from the oral and reading genres, Ferreiro’s phases shall not be centered just on writing, and the activities with syllabic families shall start from more complex contexts (texts of oral origin, or even from research in books). We should make it clear: the activity with syllabic

families is very important, but it should only be used selectively, after precise diagnostics, preferably individualized. We should only approach the syllabic families that actually constitute difficulties – we are radically against going exhaustively through the continuum of syllabic families as a way of catering for all pupils and all difficulties. To level the class in this way is to assume a low-cost, but high-risk, methodology.

In heterogeneous teaching situations there is no other solution. It is necessary to work from precise diagnostics, with more than one didactic material¹¹, and even with two teachers at the same time – one of the current problems in these classrooms is that the teacher cannot cope with the several levels he/she has to deal with.

Going back to the polemic of the methods, it is still worth placing a question and a comment: if the experts that defend the phonic method (Adams *et al.*, 2006) themselves admit that only 25% of the middle-class pupils and a “much larger number” of those “less rich in literacy activities” do not have phonological awareness in the first grades (p. 19), why assuming a method that generalizes for all subjects the direct instruction (here understood as graphophonic training)?

We have no doubt that the tongue allows different subjectivities, some more prone to the wishful game of intermittency – that allows, for example, not just the disassembly of words, but above all a to-and-fro between texts and words that can favor the fluent and meaningful reading; and others that assume a more pregnant manner of dealing with the speech itself – that does not accept the act of cutting, the segmentation of the words. In our studies, we have identified in the history of those subjects a lack of ludic games in the period of acquisition of speech (Belintane, 2006b) and we refused to classify them simply as dyslexic.

In our researches and teacher education courses, we are in a position to offer teachers contextualized didactic materials created from

their own needs, although we always have to recognize that the whole process faces two bottlenecks: school systems that do not offer working conditions so that the team can actually have a central priority (here the literacy and teaching of reading in heterogeneous learning situations); and teachers that lack the initial training needed to the activity they develop – a quick look at the Pedagogy syllabuses is quite revealing: in the case of the University of São Paulo, which is almost always seen as exemplary, there is just one semester dedicated to the study of literacy and one optional discipline entitled “Methodology of the Teaching of Linguistics”. The education of teachers, both initial and continued, is one of the main knots in this intricate web of problems.

It is not by accident that the vast context of the teaching of reading is eventually treated as a confrontation of literacy methods, and that some politicians accept the polarization and end up assuming this or that method as a way to evade complexity and to have in their hands a quick and cheap solution to an old problem that should be considered as a priority in a systematic, and not isolate, way.

11. In Belintane (2000) we suggested an environment of language and continuous teacher education in an electronic network to try to deal with this complexity. The idea here is to produce a contextualized didactic material based on the concrete demands of each particular network.

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