



The Global Circulation of Literacy Policy: Phonics, Inequality and Neo-Conservative Political Movements¹

A circulação global de políticas de alfabetização: o método fônico, desigualdade e movimentos políticos neoconservadores

Joel Windle* **

*Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), Niterói, Rio de Janeiro / Brasil

**Monash University, Melbourne/ Austrália

jawindle@gmail.com

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8544-9215>

Simone Batista***

***Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ), Seropédica, Rio de Janeiro / Brasil

simone@ufrj.br

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5781-6006>

ABSTRACT: This paper examines how reforming literacy education has become a key policy priority for contemporary conservative political movements. In Brazil, a right-wing populist Federal Government has prioritized a shift to “phonics”, while in the US and Australia conservative advocacy of phonics has resulted in policy changes over the past three decades. Phonics policy advocacy (PPA) is examined as part of a shift in the terrain of political debate towards control of cultural and educational institutions, championed by new types of policy coalition. Further, phonics policy advocacy (PPA) gains space as a result of transnational sharing of personnel, discourses and political strategy amongst conservative groups. The analysis points to connections between religious, traditionalist and neoliberal components of contemporary conservative policy advocacy. The discussion is based on examination of media reporting and policy statements, focusing on the Brazilian case, suggesting that commercial and ideological interests are particularly close in this setting, relative to other contexts that have been studied previously.

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KEYWORDS: literacy education; education policy; language policy; phonics; globalization,

RESUMO: Este artigo examina como a reforma do ensino de alfabetização tornou-se uma prioridade política fundamental para os movimentos políticos conservadores contemporâneos. No Brasil, um governo federal populista de direita priorizou uma mudança para o “método fônico”, enquanto nos EUA e na Austrália a defesa conservadora do método fônico resultou em mudanças nas políticas nas últimas três décadas. A defesa da política do método fônico (PMF) é examinada como parte de uma mudança no terreno do debate político em direção ao controle de instituições culturais e educacionais, defendido por novos tipos de coalizão política. Além disso, a defesa da política do método fônico (PMF) ganha espaço como resultado do compartilhamento transnacional de pessoal, discursos e estratégia política entre grupos conservadores. A análise aponta para conexões entre componentes religiosos, tradicionalistas e neoliberais da defesa política conservadora contemporânea. A discussão baseia-se no exame de relatórios de mídia e declarações de políticas, com foco no caso brasileiro, sugerindo que os interesses comerciais e ideológicos são particularmente próximos nesse cenário, em relação a estudos anteriores em outros lugares.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: alfabetização; letramentos; políticas educacionais; políticas linguísticas; globalização.

Introduction

One of the first acts of the neoconservative Brazilian government of Jair Bolsonaro, in 2019, was the creation of a secretariat of literacy education, headed by Carlos Nadalim, a *Youtuber*, home-schooling advocate and online bookseller. Nadalim swiftly introduced a new National Literacy Policy (BRASIL, 2019) that prioritized “phonics”, short-hand for approaches to teaching reading and writing that focus on sounding-out words, thereby associating phonemes with their corresponding graphemes; sometimes contrasted with meaning-focused “whole word” approaches. While these two approaches are generally used together, Nadalim is not only a vocal supporter of phonics, but a vehement opponent of all other approaches to literacy, explicitly, those associated with Paulo Freire (1921-1997) and, implicitly, those emerging from New Literacy Studies.

The push for phonics in Brazil “repeats” political moves and discourses mobilized in multiple national settings over the past 30 years, beginning in the USA in the 1990s, when there was a “direct political involvement in methods of literacy teaching” supported by “a conservative

coalition of legislators, foundations, fundamentalist Christians, and their allied academics” (COLLINS; BLOT, 2013). These discourses of phonics advocacy include old and fallacious arguments that there is a crisis in literacy education, that other methods of instruction ignore phonics, and that phonics is the only way to effectively teach literacy (ALLINGTON, 1997). Indeed, the debate over phonics is so stale that its renewed political relevance cannot be understood in terms of trends in research or teaching practices alone. Rather, it is necessary to ground any explanation in the social, political and economic forces at work in policy shifts (APPLE, 2006). Further, we believe that arguments around phonics can only be understood with regard for the social uses of literacy and the social relations established and projected in literacy education (COLLINS; BLOT, 2013). Exclusion of the social dimensions of literacy implies, as Apple (2001, p. 409) observes of the neoconservative push for a return to “real knowledge”, that “popular knowledge, knowledge that is connected to and organized around the lives of the most disadvantaged members of our communities, is not legitimate”.

In this paper, therefore, we seek to situate the rise of phonics in Brazil in relation to local and transnational political forces and with particular concern for the implications for educational inequalities. Much recent research in education policy (see, for example, APPLE, 2001; RAWOLLE; LINGARD, 2008; LINGARD, 2010; RIZVI; LINGARD, 2010) shares, in common with globalisation theory in general, the idea of expansion of neoliberal and neoconservative policies through a process of *replication* in the periphery of dynamics identified in the global centre (CONNELL, 2007). While these are profitable avenues of analysis, it is important to remember that all repetitions or iterations produce new meanings, an insight from the philosophy of language (DERRIDA, 1988) that we seek to carry forth here. To do so we examine disputes over textual modifications to the governmental decree introducing the Brazilian National Literacy Policy (BRASIL, 2019) and the narration of these shifting framings in the media, central to a wider dispute for power within the Ministry of Education and amongst various other policy actors (such as state and local governments).

Although some policy analysts are at pains to point out that the meanings of policy are constructed locally, through their enactment, (BALL *et al.*, 2011), socio-semiotic dimensions have been largely ignored. An interesting exception is the work of Mortimer on bilingual education policy in Paraguay, which treats local policy entextualisation in terms of a

rescaling that ultimately disadvantages Guarani-speaking children in rural areas (MORTIMER, 2016). Treating phonics policy advocacy (PPA) as text, it is possible to consider the movement from one context to another as involving resignification through “entextualisation” (BAUMAN *et al.*, 2003; BLOMMAERT, 2005). Entextualisation refers to the socio-semiotic processes of reframing and narrating texts, by which they are inserted into a new context and connected to broader discourses, historically sedimented semiotic repertoires, and distinctive social relations (SILVERSTEIN; URBAN, 1996). The question of who has the authority to undertake such reframings and narrations is central to the meanings and effects produced by entextualisation. As Silverstein and Urban observe, “entextualization both reflects and constitutes asymmetrical social relations” (SILVERSTEIN; URBAN, 1996). Considered in this light, initial entextualisations of phonics in US educational debates have undergone decontextualization through global circulation, and recontextualization in the neoconservative politics of Brazil. This circulation inevitably reflects, and produces, difference, including in the (re)production of inequalities.

The Global Policy Field and the Rise of Phonics

Sounding-out words has been part of literacy education since the nineteenth-century. However phonics gained focus as a method in opposition to shifts in the 1980s in the USA, and some other countries, towards a focus on student motivation, meaning-making and contextual cues (HEMPENSTALL, 1997; SNYDER, 2008). Warning-bells about a crisis in education, focused particularly on the “failure to learn” of disadvantaged and minority populations, resulted in, and from, alarmist reports such as *A Nation at Risk: The imperative for Education Reform* (GARDNER *et al.*, 1983), commissioned by US President Ronald Reagan. This sense of crisis also produced investigations into the efficacy of literacy instruction, such as *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (BINKLEY, 1986), which called for a renewed emphasis on phonics. Fear of declining standards and marginalized students was channelled into the first wave of neoliberal education reform in the USA, including high-stakes testing and voucher schemes (SYMCOX, 2009).

This pattern of a “crisis” in education standards, focused on disadvantaged populations, providing the pretext for neoliberal reforms has been repeated in other national settings, including Japan (TAKAYAMA,

2007), and Australia (WINDLE, 2011). This repetition can also be observed on other scales, locally in systems like Chicago's (LIPMAN, 2004), and transnationally in the influence of the OECD (GILLIS *et al.*, 2016). National-level policy coalition formation in the USA appears to be the originating model for Phonics Policy Advocacy, with its key elements present to varying degrees in other settings and across scales. Repeating some of the work of the 1985 US *Becoming a Nation of Readers* report, Australia staged a *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* in 2005, for example.

Much policy analysis suggests that such similarities signal of convergence of national and local-level policy processes into the construction of a global field of education policy, oriented towards transnational think-tanks and testing agencies, such as the OECD (SELLAR; LINGARD, 2013). The stakes, practices and agents involved in this field are increasingly globalized, not least multinational edu-business operators that profit from high-stakes testing, privatisation and outsourcing of curriculum (BALL, 2012). This convergence is indicative of the tendency of the economic field to increasingly impinge on the autonomy of other social fields, such as education (BOURDIEU, 2002; RAWOLLE; LINGARD, 2008). Education has also become central to the so-called “culture wars” (HUNTER, 1992; APPLE *et al.*, 2005; APPLE, 2006). The term “culture wars” refers to the shift in political debate towards questions of identity, religion, morality, and education, most strongly associated with conservative, and particularly evangelical and neopentecostal, political movements. However, as Apple has noted, political conservatism is based on coalitions, and in the US these typically involve neoliberals, neoconservatives and authoritarian populists (APPLE, 2006). The differences in the “balance of forces” between these groups and in which of them stand to gain from policy reform are the basis for explaining cross-national differences in this account (APPLE, 2001).

Thus, “repetition” always entails difference – difference in the political groupings involved in the task of entextualisation, in the strategies for entextualisation, and in the wider context of social relations that shape the meanings and effects of entextualisation. In Australia, for example, phonics advocacy was driven by neoconservative political groupings organized through Rupert Murdoch's News Corp media empire, connected to mining interests via think-tanks, and mobilising a pre-existing discourse of paternalistic concern for Indigenous communities (WINDLE, 2011; 2015). One of the effects of this entextualisation was to reinforce the control

of multinational mining groups over Indigenous communities, as control over schools and curricula were handed over to conservative think-tanks and commercial entities, despite their failure to demonstrate improvements (AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH, 2013).

The entextualisation of phonics policy in Brazil

In Brazil, the elements of the conservative coalition that Apple (2006) identified are present, along with a much stronger commercial market in education services and a politically weaker public education sector (HYPOLITO, 2010). The phonics movement appears to offer something to each of the components discussed by Apple. For neoliberals, the embedding of phonics in commercial and easily commercializable packages makes it a perfect market commodity - in contrast to constructivist approaches which require teacher engagement with local contexts in order for pedagogical strategies to be developed. For neoconservatives, such homogenized packaging offers the promise of “teacher-proof” literacy policy that reduces perceived ideological bias. Discursively, neoliberals and neoconservatives can find common ground in arguing that phonics is a scientifically rational method (neoliberals), and a socially neutral approach (neoconservatives). For authoritarian populists, such as president Jair Bolsonaro himself, the opportunity of bypassing traditional policy actors, and processes of consultative policy development, is appealing.

Advocacy of phonics has historically sidelined important institutional actors, such as teacher unions, university-based academics, and teachers themselves. This is, indeed, what happened in Brazil with the appointment of Nadalim, a relative outsider with no experience as a policy-maker, and the abrupt implementation of a National Literacy Policy by presidential decree (BRASIL, 2019). Unlike previous iterations of phonics policy entextualisation, there was no commission or report preceding the policy, and no involvement of a wider cast of policy actors who could provide an authorizing “echo-chamber”. Instead, it is possible to identify a narrow support base amongst evangelical Christians and far-right ideologues who are on the fringes of education policy as a field, and bring limited authority or legitimacy to the task of entextualisation.

Here we focus our analysis on two media texts that provide narratives for the entextualisation of phonics policy under Nadalim. The first

is representative of an internalist perspective, produced within, and for, sympathetic neoconservative circles (FAVRETTO, 2018); and the second of an externalist perspective, in which the contested authority of this entextualisation is evident, produced within the mainstream media (SALDAÑA, 2019a).

Following the election of Bolsonaro, but prior to the appointment of Nadalim as Literacy secretary, the online media outlet *Sempre Família* (“Always Family”) published a profile entitled “Carlos Nadalim, the critic of Paulo Freire who is winning-over families on the internet” (FAVRETTO, 2018). *Sempre Família* is narrowly oriented towards a conservative, religious audience, defining its mission as

the defence of life from conception to natural death, valuing of marriage as the natural union between a man and a woman, promotion of moral virtues and values, and the importance of educating children as the fundamental right and duty of parents.² (SEMPRE FAMÍLIA, 2018)

The page regularly publishes articles supporting home-schooling, and opposing “ideological” school curricula, such as discussion of gender and sexuality; being politically aligned with the evangelical pastor and Minister for Women, Family and Human Rights, Damares Alves.

Nadalim is introduced, in the profile, as “an enthusiast of homeschooling who was recently honoured by parliament” and as the creator of the Youtube channel “how to bring up your children”. With expectations of his imminent inclusion in the Bolsonaro government, Nadalim is further described as a “friend” of the appointed education minister, Ricardo Vélez-Rodríguez, a disciple of neoconservative Youtuber Olavo de Carvalho:

Olavo de Carvalho has often said, and I agree, in light of what I can prove with my method, that it is necessary to return to the phonic method of learning to pre-read and read, and Ricardo knows this (FAVRETTO, 2018).³

² a defesa da vida desde a concepção até a morte natural, a valorização do casamento como união natural entre homem e mulher, a promoção de virtudes e valores morais e a importância da educação dos filhos como direito e dever fundamental dos pais.

³ Olavo de Carvalho já disse várias vezes, e eu concordo, diante daquilo que posso comprovar com meu método, que é preciso voltar ao método fônico de pré-alfabetização

In this excerpt, Nadalim shows that he is on first-name terms with the education minister, Ricardo Vélez-Rodríguez, and that he moves in the same circle of “Olavistas”, until now a group of relative outsiders who cultivate a traditionalist view of culture and morals, and revisionism in relation to political history. The prize Nadalim received in parliament, apparently indicative of wide support, was sponsored by a member of the conservative Catholic Renovation Movement and president of the “parliamentary front for defence of life and family”, Diego Garcia. Inserted into this context, phonics indexes the conservative nostalgia for an earlier, simpler educational era, as well as the “discipline” of military rule (1964-1985). This appeals to conservative evangelicals and Catholics by referencing a period of more rigidly enforced gender and sexual norms, at least in educational settings, in harmony with messages such as “now is the era of girls wear pink, boys wear blue”, announced by Minister Damares Alves.

A number of discursive moves, repeated from previous iterations, can be identified in the entextualising narrative of *Sempre Família*, in which Nadalim’s own voice takes centre-stage in an interview format:

1. **Anecdotal and observational evidence of an unrecognized crisis** (“I was a professor of philosophy at universities in northern Paraná in 2011 and was amazed at the difficulties faced by most students in reading and understanding simple texts, mere newspaper articles.”).⁴
2. **Bombastic claims on rates of (functional) illiteracy** (“The rate of students with inadequate knowledge for their age is 55%”;⁵ “The inadequacy and failure of this approach are observed in the PISA results, where Brazil occupies the last places in reading. This educational failure in schools is reflected in the intellectual and academic production of higher education, where the scores in ENADE demonstrate the intellectual and cultural calamity that currently affects our society.”).⁶

e alfabetização, e o Ricardo sabe disso.

⁴ Fui professor de filosofia em universidades do norte do Paraná em 2011 e ficava surpreso com as dificuldades enfrentadas pela maioria dos alunos em ler e compreender textos simples, meros artigos de jornal.

⁵ O índice de alunos com conhecimento inadequado para a idade é de 55%

⁶ A inadequação e a falência dessa abordagem são observadas nos resultados do PISA, em que o Brasil ocupa os últimos lugares em leitura. Esse fracasso educacional na formação básica se reflete na produção intelectual e acadêmica do ensino superior, em que as

3. **Home-spun solutions and innovations** (“Nadalim is the creator of a method of literacy focused on the phonic aspects”).⁷
4. **Opposition and denial from the education “establishment”** (“Nadalim...goes against the hegemonic practices in most of the education departments”).⁸
5. **Salvation of poor and disadvantaged students** (“children, especially the most disadvantaged, need explicit teaching of decoding”).⁹
6. **Claims that phonics is the only evidence-based and unpolitical method** (“What I want is for him [student] to master coding and decoding techniques. What he’ll do with it later is a matter for the community”).¹⁰

This last discursive strategy exposes the most exaggerated claims of Nadalim and their fragility to accusations of self-interest. Nadalim’s conversion to phonics came when he began working in a for-profit private school owned by his mother. Influenced by Olavo de Carvalho, he introduced a new program that he subsequently commercialized through books sold online. Nadalim writes of this experience:

In a few weeks the children had already shown considerable changes in reading, reading fluently, memorizing and reciting classic texts of the Portuguese language.¹¹

In keeping with other experiences globally, phonics is proposed here as a method for other people’s children. Phonics has been advocated primarily for disadvantaged communities, including Black, Indigenous and Latino communities in the USA (LIPMAN, 2004), Indigenous communities

pontuações no ENADE demonstram a calamidade intelectual e cultural que atualmente acomete nossa sociedade.

⁷ Nadalim é o criador de um método de alfabetização focado nos aspectos fônicos.

⁸ Vai na contramão das práticas hegemônicas na maioria das secretarias de educação.

⁹ As crianças, principalmente aquelas de meios mais desfavorecidos, precisam de um ensino explícito da decodificação.

¹⁰ O que eu quero é que ela domine técnicas de codificação e decodificação. O que ela fará com isso depois é um problema da comunidade.

¹¹ Em poucas semanas as crianças já mostravam mudanças consideráveis na leitura, lendo com fluência, memorizando e recitando textos clássicos da língua portuguesa.

in Australia (WINDLE, 2015), and in Brazil has now been introduced in the “needy community” where Nadalim’s edu-business is located. Similar to other settings, elite private schools are free to follow constructivist models of literacy education – the lock-step “back to basics” model is part of the disciplinary and repressive role of the school in relation to working-class populations only.

As in the Australian case, results claimed by Nadalim were judged on speed of reading alone. However the “homespun” and anecdotal base of Nadalim’s success story, unpublished and untested, sets it apart from phonics advocacy elsewhere, which has relied on a network of academic and media supporters, and on an apparently broader and more credible research base. The suspicion of self-interest was confirmed when Nadalim requested that his books be included in government programs just days after his appointment (CAFARDO, 2019).

The fragility of phonics entextualisation in Brazil is further evident in mainstream media treatment, as shown by an article published in the national daily newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* on disputes over the wording of the presidential decree establishing a new National Literacy Policy (SALDAÑA, 2019a). In March 2019, Nadalim put forward a version of the decree favouring phonics that was criticized and changed by other ministry officials, before being altered again by Nadalim on the eve of its publication on April 11. Much of the article attends to these textual alterations and their chronology. The article identifies the following actors, in order of appearance:

1. “Ministerial Secretaries” (officials) who approved changes to remove phonics from the policy;
2. The Ministry of Education, anonymous author of a memorandum declaring that the decree “should not define any specific method”;
3. “Specialists and Ministerial Secretaries” who argued that no specific method be identified;
4. “Members of the Ministry of Education led by the former Executive Secretary, Brigadier Ricardo Machado” who authored the removal of phonics from the draft;

5. “representatives of state and municipal secretaries (Undime and Consed, respectively) and the National Council of Education)”, who co-authored the removal of phonics;
6. “The president of Undime,¹² Alessio Lima”, who expressed dismay at the last-minute shift back to phonics;
7. “a phonics method enthusiast, the secretary for literacy Carlos Nadalim”;
8. “the more ideological group in the Ministry of Education, linked to the writer Olavo de Carvalho – like Nadalim”, who oppose pre-existing curriculum policies.

Of all of the actors cited as being involved in the policy, only Nadalim acted as an advocate of phonics, while the others represent the authority of traditional policy processes. The most dramatic moment of tension involves attempts to maintain versions of the text confidential:

So that there would be no leak, Machado took the material to the Executive Office of the President, and in paper form. A phonics method enthusiast, the Secretary of Literacy, Carlos Nadalim, went to the Executive Office this week to revert the text – and got what he wanted.¹³ (SALDAÑA, 2019a)

Nadalim, initially isolated in the ministry, was forced to repeat his own policy text in order to get around policy opponents. His victory was based not on convincing these other actors to join in the repetition of pro-phonics positions, but in the sacking of all five other ministerial secretaries on the day before the final decree was published (SALDAÑA, 2019b). The efforts to maintain the drafts secret within the Ministry and from the press were unmitigated failures, resulting in constant interruptions to the narration of phonics as the salvation of Brazilian education. One curious aspect is that since the secretariat of literacy was founded by Bolsonaro, Nadalim’s diary consists entirely of “internal dispatches”. There is not a single meeting with local schools or education authorities recorded.

¹² Body representing state education systems.

¹³ Para que não houvesse vazamento, Machado levou o material à Casa Civil pessoalmente, e em papel. Entusiasta do método fônico, o secretário de Alfabetização, Carlos Nadalim, foi à Casa Civil nesta semana para reverter o texto – e conseguiu.

Framing literacy and inequality within and beyond phonics

So far, we have focused on the contextual circumstances and actors involved in entextualising the National Literacy Policy – either through paving the way discursively, or through guerrilla drafting strategies. Here we turn to the language used in the presidential decree itself. In the specific case of language policies, Pennycook (2017) reminds us that they usually have to do with regulating language ideologies. What we can observe from the institutionalization of the phonics method, by means of a decree, is that it aims at regulating the idea of language as an abstract entity detached from culture, identity, subjectivity, social practices, and agency.

It is worth noting, that Nadalim draws a sharp distinction between learning to read (*alfabetização*) and literacy (*letramento*), identifying the second concept as the ideological fruit of “cultural Marxism” (FAVRETTTO, 2018). In order to avoid using the latter term in the decree, *letramento* is replaced with the European Portuguese term *literacia* (BRASIL, 2019). *Alfabetização* is defined, in instrumental terms, as “teaching of the skills of reading and writing in an alphabetic system, so that the learning reader becomes able to read and write words and texts with autonomy and understanding” (Art 2.I), and *literacia* as “the conjunction of knowledge, skills and attitudes related to reading and writing and its productive practice” (Art 2.VII). The 11 definitions provided at the opening of the Policy carefully avoid reference to any social contexts for production or use of texts, relating literacy only to mathematics and parents (a nod to the home-schooling movement, repeated in Articles 3, 5 and 8). Reading ability is to be measured in “precision, speed and prosody”, (Art. 2 IV), divorced from comprehension, dialogue and meaning making.

The decree outlines the following objective for literacy instruction:

Emphasis on teaching six essential components of literacy: a) phonemic awareness; b) systematic phonic instruction; c) fluency in oral reading; d) vocabulary development; e) understanding of texts; and f) writing production (Art 3.IV).

The evacuation of the purposes and contexts of literacy is striking here, directly and explicitly opposed to the maxim that reading of the word is always preceded by reading the world (FREIRE, 1992/2011). Children’s cultural and social baggage is ignored by this evacuation, in line with the abolition of the secretariat for diversity within the Ministry of Education,

and attacks on the teaching of African and Indigenous cultures and history in schools.

According to the decree, what matters most is that students master phonics even though they are not able to make practical use of the knowledge they master. The focus is the association between grapheme and phoneme and not necessarily what arises from this association. Soares (2003) uses a valuable analogy to exemplify how frustrating this orientation can be for children: the author compares this teaching model to a person who learns how to master the microwave functions and buttons but who never has the opportunity to, in fact, make real use of it to cook, bake, or even heat something.

The consequence of this narrow and technicist definition of literacy instruction is, as Apple (2001) observed of the US case, to disqualify the knowledge of disadvantaged populations, and to teach without taking into consideration the variety of knowledges, abilities and experiences a child brings with them. As Kalantzis and Cope (2009) also note, “phonics fails to bridge the deeper gaps, and thus fails learners who do not come from cultures of writing” (p. 197). Children who are not used to scholastically authorized cultures of writing in their immediate contexts remain excluded from literate practices when school-based literacy practices are restricted to mechanical tasks.

The National Literacy Policy addresses equality by locating literacy as “an instrument for overcoming social vulnerability and a precondition for complete citizenship”¹⁴ (Art 3. VIII) and supporting “equality of educational opportunities”¹⁵ (Art 3. IX). Nevertheless, the kinds of difficulty with literacy and knowledge identified as relevant to improving literacy rates is focused on individual-level and cognitive explanations. The relative efficacy of approaches to literacy instruction cannot explain the racially and economically polarized educational outcomes that have consistently placed white and wealthy students far ahead of poor and black students (SILVA; HASENBALG, 2000). The policy entextualisation of a relationship between literacy, narrowly disciplined instructional techniques and equality, thus, contributes to naturalising and reproducing racial inequalities

¹⁴ Instrumento de superação de vulnerabilidades sociais e condição para o exercício pleno da cidadania.

¹⁵ Igualdade de oportunidades educacionais.

established through the history of slavery. In Brazil, illiteracy is intimately tied to racialized and regionalized identities, as well as the enforcement of class divisions through linguistic ideologies enforced through humiliation (BAGNO, 1999, 2014). Hence, efforts to cast schools catering to poor and black students as failing, in the narration of phonics advocacy, connect to historically-established meanings and racial hierarchies in new ways, always, to some extent, distinctive from the meanings generated in the originating contexts. A further dimension to the construction of meanings is added by the organisation of urban space in Brazilian cities, and the sharp materiality of restrictions to movement and cultural goods between centre and periphery in Brazil (FELTRAN, 2008) and other highly polarized settings in the global south (NDIMANDE, 2015).

Phonics, as outlined in the National Policy, implies direct teacher instruction, drilling, memorisation, and timed mechanical reproduction (said to be “fluency”), constituting a teacher-centered method, typically expressed through teacher orders and corrections, and a focus on reproduction, obedience to the rules. Attending to monovocal rules, teachers are unable to take the learner’s subjectivity into consideration. On the contrary, the phonics method detaches the subject from their learning context, eliminating their protagonism on the learning process. Reality is considered as given, unique and independent of the subjects who live it. Phonics, as narrowly defined in Brazilian policy and advocacy, seeks to repeat a time “in which learners were destined to belong to traditional workplaces requiring deference to authority and whose skills requirements were minimal, predictable and stable” (KALANTZIS; COPE, 2009, p. 25).

The nationwide implementation of phonics methods can thus be seen as an element in an ideological project to produce a docile labor force for the next decades, which is always focused on disadvantaged and, importantly, potentially dangerous and deviant populations – poor, black, and favela-dwelling. We believe there is a political – and not a pedagogical – end to this decision, one that is propelled by a fear amongst the elite middle classes of the empowerment of the impoverished classes. This fear materialized in recent decades through the partial democratization of access to higher education, with Federal University students now being, in their majority, black and from poor households where neither parent attended university (SOUZA, 2019).

Reframing transformative literacy education

Maintaining our emphasis on the socially situated production of meaning, we end the article by putting-forth a vision of literacy education that recognizes and builds upon the insights of text circulation and (re) entextualisation. This exercise helps to further locate phonics as an approach to literacy that denies its own social-situatedness, one of the central tenets for its success as an “evidence-based” and “un-ideological” method.

As Kress (2007) argues, educational practices are linked to subjectivity construction, and inclusive pedagogical practices encourage students to construct their subjectivity as critical citizens and creative individuals through and with texts. Therefore, we argue that the text, rather than the phoneme, should guide literacy pedagogy, for “text is the result of social action, and so the centrality of text means that literacy is always seen as a matter of social action and social forces, and all aspects of literacy are seen as deriving from these actions and forces” (KRESS, 2007, p. 86). Following Kalantzis and Cope (2009, p. 188), it is possible to conceive of school as a place where students may be “knowledge makers and not just knowledge consumers”, because we consider that “learning to write is about forming an identity” (p. 197).

The aim of developing literacy, thus framed, is letting students understand that humans build the world contextually with words and texts. Therefore, we argue that it is extremely important for the child to think about language, about the technology of writing and all its social, economic and political consequences for those who master it and for those who don't. By thinking about writing from childhood onwards, the student gets used to creating, elaborating and re-elaborating their textual productions.

Shifting literacy conceptually from the grapheme-phoneme association involves epistemological reflection on education “designed to stimulate action for change” (LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2006, p. 10), rather than instrumentalizing students for codifying and decodifying. Mediation by teachers not only implies procedures and measures directed to the teaching of a certain syllabus, but reflects the educational paradigm of a society, and the sociopolitical perspective of subjectivity that a society puts into circulation. Whether the educator acknowledges it or not, the methods used in pedagogical practices are always linked to political objectives for education. Procedures are just the visible part of pedagogy; but beyond

this, there is an invisible facet of method, which is made up of educational, social, and ontological paradigms, and it is these that ultimately shape the textually-mediated relationship between student and society.

Teaching methods serve a political, economic and social agenda that represents a vision of society; and we strongly argue we should entextualize literacy teaching as a practice for transformative education which nurtures social sensitivity and critical citizenship. Moreover, we ought to educate teachers to consider knowledges as repertoires for the constitution of plural citizens, to teach language for negotiating meanings, and to let their students know that language admits innovation and provokes restating of truths. As Paulo Freire (1997) reminds us, reading is not an exercise of mechanical memorization, but an intelligent operation that includes a creative experience through (re)-interpretation of the world.

We believe that non-directive analytical literacy methods allow children to manipulate oral, written, visual, multimodal texts, and, thereby, promote agency, decision making strategies, and creativity. Analytical methods frame the child as social subject, a thinking being who builds their knowledge and is able to construct meanings; thus, these methods are concerned with stimulating speaking and listening, and not only codifying and decodifying. What matters most in this vision of literacy development is the intimacy a student has with literacy practices. A child needs to be in contact with texts – “the result of the social semiotic action of representation” (KRESS, 2007, p. 84) – and with a variety of genres to understand “the social principles that generate the textual forms” (p. 86), in order to recognize the social actions we effectively accomplish by the use of language.

Conclusion

Literacy is inexorably tied to the distribution of power, and thus it is important to investigate shifts in literacy policy as part of changes in political alliances and actors. As such, our contribution here has been to reposition (or re-entextualize) phonics policy advocacy within a wider set of political and historical movements. This has several implications for how literacy policy is considered as a social, political and pedagogical text.

Teaching methods always have to do with pedagogical and formative objectives. That means that we choose the methods based on implicit or explicit objectives, and that the method chosen denotes the objectives of the pedagogical work, being closely attached to the philosophy that grounds

the educational operation of the teachers. No teaching method is neutral; on the contrary, it is always connected to socially situated perspectives on education, identity, knowledge, subjectivity, and citizenship developed in a certain spacetime. Libâneo (2011, p. 151) argues that teaching methods – steps, procedures, techniques – are, in reality, grounded in a reflection towards on what learning means, and how the curriculum is connected to real life: “they [the methods] derive from a conception of society, from the nature of human practice in the world, from the process of knowledge, and, especially, from the comprehension of the educational practice in a certain society”.

Hence, teaching methods are linked to which epistemologies are acceptable at a time, what model of society is planned, and what educational reality is desirable. When one chooses a method, it doesn't relate just to the scientific shape and contours of an object of study, respecting its possibilities, dynamics and limitations, but is intrinsically linked to a reflection of how that specific field of knowledge is constructed (entextualized), mobilized (circulated), and embedded in pedagogical activity (re-entextualized).

To date, attempts to entextualize phonics as the only legitimate and scientific approach to literacy have met with limited success in Brazil. Nadalim stands as an isolated figure, whose narrative of phonics is limited to his own business activities and close circle of ideological associates. This is a small policy world, without dissenting voices, but also without the capacity to generate wider repetitions or repercussions – particularly as the Federal Government has no direct control over state and local government school systems and few media or academic allies have appeared. Indeed the mainstream media emphasizes discordant voices that constantly interrupt the entextualisation narrative set up by Nadalim.

Brazilian literacy policy is, therefore, at a potential turning-point, lacking the sophisticated entextualisation provided by government commissions, conservative think-tanks and media commentators, but with a massive commercial education sector and potential neoliberal allies ready to take advantage of any neoconservative shift. Fortunately, counter-narratives are already well-established through the social movements that have forced schools and universities to recognize and give space to marginalized and oppressed groups, who recognize the tools of their oppression in neoconservative curriculum projects. These movements include well-organized and successful black and LGBTI rights organisations,

as well as the mass of young Brazilians who have broken-down the doors of public universities over a period of mass expansion and the introduction of affirmative-action policies that reserve places for poor and black students. These social changes make it impossible to repeat or replicate, even partially, the lock-step and authoritarian educational model of the military dictatorship that inspires the Bolsonaro Government, even in schools placed under military command.

Contribuição dos autores

Os autores trabalharam conjuntamente na pesquisa e análise teórico-metodológica que deu origem ao artigo.

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