KNOWLEDGE ANALYSIS OF TEACHERS WORKING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ON THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LITERACY PROFICIENCY

Análise do conhecimento de professores atuantes no ensino fundamental acerca da linguagem escrita na perspectiva do letramento

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: to analyze the knowledge of a group of teachers inserted in public elementary school about concepts related to written language and literacy proficiency. **Methods:** data were collected through a questionnaire covering training and knowledge of written language and the concept of literacy proficiency. After signing an informed consent, people answered questionnaires individually. The statistical analysis was performed from Fisher's test at significance level of 0.05 and the Chi-squared test significance level of 0.05. **Results:** there was no significant difference between teachers' knowledge about the concept of written language, literacy, literacy proficiency, the reasons that led to the concept of literacy incorporation in the educational system and the period of teacher training. It was predominant among teachers a conception of language as code / instrument and representation of speech (80%). Although 80% of the teachers have read texts about literacy proficiency and 84.8% identify differences between this concept and that of literacy, only 12% adequately established that differentiation. **Conclusion**: there are restrictions on teachers' knowledge about written language and therefore, limitations for the establishment of effective theory-practice associations in order to encourage meaningful reading and writing practices concerning Portuguese teaching / learning in the early grades of elementary school. The study provides evidence for the design of proposals in the field of Speech Language and Hearing Sciences focusing on education that aim the socialization of knowledge and the promotion of literacy proficiency.

KEYWORDS: Reading; Writing; Education; Language

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INTRODUCTION

The limitations and restrictions relative to the ownership and use of language written by the Brazilian population has historically been identified as a social problem whose determinants and implications are related to poor material and subjective conditions that characterize the way of life of a significant portion of this population.[1-3] Practices and experiences of reading and writing experienced by different social groups, in addition to revealing different ways of relating to symbolic tools, highlight the

unequal opportunities to access that are present in Brazilian society related to material goods that in turn decisively influence the forms of inclusion and social participation.[2,3]

From the recognition that the significant mastery of writing is one of the conditions so that all people can make use of symbolic tools and material goods currently available[4] in society, one can grasp the social dimension of interventions, formulated and implemented in the context of speech, that address this type of language usage.

As such, studies and actions aimed at promoting phonological written language that address the appropriation/ teaching/ learning processes of written language are significantly relevant because they focus on the educational context and, more specifically, on the continuing education of teachers.[5-7] To implement such practices, there is a need for speech-language pathologists to address conceptions of language with teachers, the aspects relating to appropriation processes, relations between oral and written usage, and problems that can occur in these processes. The emphasis on promoting discussions with teachers and reflexive actions around such aspects is justified since they underlie the theoretical and practical knowledge guiding pedagogical practices developed by teachers.[8]

Importantly, concern regarding the quality, nature, and impact of mediation implemented by teachers are related to the access and use of reading and writing by children, constituting a central issue of national and international studies developed in different fields of Education, Speech, and Linguistics.[4-6,9,10]

It is in this direction that research in speech-language pathology[5,11,12] has been emphasizing the need for speech-language pathologists inside the school, to promote, from a collaborative perspective, reflections on the concepts and practices of writing and its appropriation processes used by teachers.

Several studies[5,6,8] that sought to analyze the knowledge and concepts formulated and disseminated in education about literacy, reveal a gap in relation to steps laid out in Brazilian educational policies, specifically regarding the theoretical and methodological parameters contemplated in the National Curriculum – for the Portuguese language[13] and National Curriculum Guidelines[14], as well as opportunities for teachers to read, interpret, and incorporate these guidelines in practices geared to the teaching of the Portuguese language. Despite the fact that official documents have been prepared to support the implementation of meaningful actions for reading and writing, it is noteworthy that a significant number of teachers do not have access to such documents or do not understand the concepts and proposals set forth.[15-17]

This situation highlights some of the problems that affect, in a negative way, groups of teachers involved in the teaching/ learning of the mother tongue in its oral and written forms. Among such problems are:

- the fact that they ignore or have limited understanding of the concepts that underlie the socio-historical theory, especially with regard to the concepts of literacy, discoursive genres, intertextuality, language variety, authorship, and dialogue.[8,18,19]
- the fact that they cannot incorporate contributions arising from this theory into their teaching practices, and, therefore, the fundamentals shaping the Portuguese language teaching guidelines in Brazil.[13,14]

It is especially interesting in this study to explain how literacy has been conceptualized in those documents, from its differentiation from the notion of alphabetization, which, until the 1980s, directed the Brazilian educational system.[18] In those documents[13,14] literacy is conceived as a continuous process of integration and participation in written culture that takes into account access to different written statements in Brazilian society, such as the ability to participate effectively in social practices mediated via written language. Alphabetization, in turn, is understood as a specific process and needed for the appropriation of the writing system. That is, it refers to the appropriation of the alphabetic principles and spelling of Portuguese.

The fact that official documents, research, materials, and textbooks, based on the concept of literacy, move in the contexts in which teachers participate, the non-appropriation of such resources shows a contradiction. In other words, contrary to the official proposals that are based on the concept of written language as a constitutive social practice of the subjects, the predominant associationist theories can be seen subsidizing the teaching of the Portuguese language in Brazil.[16,20-22]

The importance of analyzing and overcoming the problems involved with the aforementioned contradiction and discrepancy becomes even more evident when considering indexes, statistics, and data obtained from surveys that identify the serious problems that characterize the Brazilian educational system, and, therefore, are related to low levels of literacy of the population. In this sense, it is worth noting, per the 2009 data from the INAF (National Indicator of Functional Literacy)[2], that 54% of Brazilians who completed up to the 4th grade of

elementary school reached the level of rudimentary literacy, i.e., they have no more than the ability to locate explicit information in short texts or performing simple mathematical operations.[2]

Based on the above considerations, this study aims to examine the knowledge of a group of teachers working in public education about the fundamental concepts related to written language and literacy.

METHODS

The subjects were 90 teachers working in Municipal Schools of different cities in the State of Parana: Curitba, Ivaipora, Arapua, Colombo, Piraquara, Campina Grande do Sul. A criterion was adopted for the inclusion of school teachers in the 1st and 2nd years of fundamental education, because those levels of education are considered to be the start for the process of teaching/ learning for reading and writing. This study was developed from exploratory field research which was conducted through a questionnaire composed of 21 questions covering the identification, training, knowledge of written language, and the concept of literacy. It should be noted that the analysis of the relationship between academic training and the knowledge of the participants was established from the data relating to training in teaching. A criterion was adopted based on the level of education attained by the largest number of participants who included in their content the teaching/ learning of reading and writing. The questionnaires were filed out individually and in isolation, in the schools that teachers worked in, and after institutional approval with the signing of consent and waiver forms by the research subjects. It should be pointed out that turning in an incomplete questionnaire was not considered a factor for the exclusion of the subject.

The results were organized, presented, and analyzed from categories previously defined in the questionnaire, which addressed: - teachers' knowledge about written language and the concept of literacy.

This study was initially approved by the Research Ethics Committee, registered under the number 1252.

The statistical analysis was performed using the Fisher test, at a significance level of 0.05 and the Chi-squared test, at a significance level of 0.05.

RESULTS

Of the 90 teachers participating in the survey, only one was male, the mean age was 34.8 with a standard deviation of 7.9 years. As for the academic qualifications of the subjects, 91% (82) completed college, among which 57% (52) had degrees directly related to teaching/ learning of reading and writing, and 96.67% (87) completed the teaching course.

Data regarding the relationship between decades of training in teaching and conceptions of written language understood by teachers can be seen in Table 1. To analyze this relationship, we applied the Fischer test from which it was found that there is no significant relationship (p=0.1239) between the period of training in teaching and those conceptions.

As described in Table 2, one can observe the relationship between the fact of whether or not participants performed readings that dealt with the concept of literacy and the decade of training in teaching. From the application of the Fischer test it can be verified that there is no significant relationship (p=0.5108) between training period and text reading that deals with the concept.

According to the data described in Table 3, as to the relationship between the decade of training in teaching and knowledge of the participants about whether there is a difference between the concepts of literacy and alphabetization, it can be observed through the Chi-squared test that there is no significant relationship (p=0.3559) between these aspects.

For analysis of the relationship, as described in Table 4, between the fact that teachers have not done or read texts that address the concept of literacy and conceptualize adequately or inadequately alphabetization and literacy, we used the Fisher test, from which can be seen that there is no significant relationship (p=0.0507) between these facts.

Table 5 shows the relationship between if the participants have read or not read text that addresses the concept of literacy and the knowledge of literacy regarding the reasons that led to the incorporation of such a concept in the Brazilian educational system.

Table 1 - Relationship between the decade of training in teaching and the conception of written language

Conception of Written Language	Decade of Education in Teaching			
	1970 a 1989 N (%)	1990 a 2009 N (%)	Sem resposta N (%)	Total N (%)
Code, an instrument of expression/ communication/ representation of speech	16	48	8	72 (80.0)
Interaction/ process of interpretation/ meaning	3	2	-	5 (5.6)
No answer	5	7	1	13 (14.4)
Total	24 (26.7)	57 (63.4)	9 (10.0)	90 (100)

Table 2 - Relationship between reading text that addresses the concept of literacy and the decade of training in teaching

Decade of Education in Teaching	Did reading exercise that addressed the concept of literacy			
	Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%
1970 – 1989	20	22.22	4	4.44
1990 – 2009	45	50.0	12	13.33
No answer	7	7.78	2	2.22
Total	72	80.0	18	20.0

Table 3 – Relationship between the decade of education in teaching and teachers' belief about the difference between alphabetization and literacy

Decade of Education in Teaching	Believe that there is a difference between alphabetization and literacy			
	Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%
1970 – 1989	19	79.2	5	20.8
1990 – 2009	48	87.3	7	12.7
Total	67	84.8	12	15.2

Table 4 – Relationship between giving reading exercises that deal with literacy and teachers' knowledge regarding the difference between alphabetization and literacy

Gave reading exercise that dealt with literacy	Knowledgeable regarding the difference between alphabetization and literacy			
	No answer N(%)	No N(%)	Yes N(%)	Total N(%)
No answer	0	0	1	1 (1.1)
No	5	2	10	17 (18.89)
Yes	12	28	32	72 (80)
Total	17 (18.89)	30 (33.33)	43 (47.78)	90 (100)

Table 5 – Relationship between giving reading exercises that deal with literacy and teachers' knowledge about how it is incorporated into the educational system

Gave reading exercise that dealt with literacy	Knows why the concept of literacy was incorporated into the educational system			
	No answer N(%)	No N(%)	Yes N(%)	Total N(%)
No answer	0	0	1	1 (1.11)
No	0	16	1	17 (18.89)
Yes	5	41	26	72 (80)
Total	5 (5.56)	57 (63.33)	28 (31.11)	90 (100)

DISCUSSION

Teachers' responses show a predominance of thinking about written language as a code/ instrument and representation of speech, something seen in the findings of other studies.[8,23] This position contradicts the theoretical and methodological guidance expressed in official documents drawn up to direct the teaching of the Portuguese language in Brazil[13,14], since the former concept is not aligned to the theory of written language as constitutive of the subjects, social relationships, and the concept of literacy .

Whereas the inclusion of the term and, therefore, the concept of literacy in the Brazilian educational system has been taking place since the 1980s and, more significantly, from the 1990s[4,15], two aspects should be analyzed:

- The fact that the instrumental view of language is prevalent among the subjects irrespective of the duration of their training in teaching;
- The fact that reading texts about the concept of literacy was not significantly higher among teachers trained in the years from 1990 to 2009.

The non-incorporation of nationally available academic advancements that have been published in recent decades, as well as the theoretical and practical approaches conveyed in those documentos[13,14] that were formulated to ensure quality teaching for the Brazilian population, can be seen in the teachers' responses based on associationist theories[16,18,24] that put forth:

- The written form as a transcript of the oral;
- The teacher as a coach of perceptual skills (visual and auditory discrimination, fine motor skills, etc.) that participate in the mechanisms of encoding (writing) and decoding (reading);
- The student as one who learns and internalizes the knowledge from repetition and memorization of the writing pattern.
- Alphabetization as the mastery of techniques of coding and decoding of a given code;
- Training activities of the prerequisites for reading and writing such as dictation, copying, and writing as priority in the alphabetization process.

The prevailing notion of writing as a code, with the answers provided by the teachers, in addition to pointing out inefficiencies in the process of teacher training, has been identified as one of the determinants of school failure, school dropout, and low levels of literacy in the population.[5,17,19]

This dominance also allows one to understand why, despite a significant number of teachers having stated that there are differences between the concepts of alphabetization and literacy, less than half of them appropriately set such a differentiation.

The difficulty in understanding such concepts limits the possibilities of teachers to lead the teaching/ learning of Portuguese from the proposed "literacy alphabetizing", widespread in educational guidelines. This is because to take this perspective the teacher should understand alphabetization and literacy as distinct processes, however inseparable.[13,14,24]

As to the answers provided by a significant portion of teachers with regards to the concept of such processes, it is important to note that performing readings of texts involving literacy did not provide for a positive impact in the theory mastery of those teachers. Such findings corroborate studies[5,17,19] that analyze the fact that although most teachers have access to written materials and read regularly, they do not read scientific and academic texts to incorporate and to use actively and critically regarding the contents in such studies.

Showing the extent of the problem, analyzed by studies[8,16,19] that report a lack of understanding by teachers in the education policies of the Portuguese language, attention is called to the small percentage of teachers who reported knowing the reasons that

led to the inclusion of the concept of literacy in the Brazilian educational system.

The findings of this study suggest that professional training in teaching, in the periods of 1970-1989 and 1990-2009, have not expanded the theoretical development of the teachers on the references that effectively can support pedagogical action to ensure that students participate fully and effectively in production and interpretation practices using written texts.

This fact emphasizes the need for theoretical and practical approaches that analyze the quality of the training processes for academic-professional teachers, as well as their abilities in reading, interpretation, and dissemination of knowledge conveyed in academic texts.[6,17,23]

It is interesting to clarify that despite the fact that the systematization and dissemination of official documents[13,14] represent a breakthrough in actions for quality education, it is essential that the reading and analysis of such documents occur in work during the teachers' education. However, it is essential that such training be understood as a continuous process and interactive in nature[16,25,26], which recognizes and legitimizes the position of the teacher as critical and responsive.[19,25,27]

It should also be emphasized that there is a need for actions aimed at teacher training, promoting both the theoretical study about language and its processes of appropriation, as well as the materialization and systematization of such foundations in the planning and execution of classroom activities.

In this way, the study provides elements for the design of proposed speech-language therapy aimed at the educational context that, in a cooperative manner, focus on (re)building/ (re)defining meanings and uses surrounding the practices of reading and writing experienced by the teacher. It is understood that sharing and socialization of knowledge among speech-language pathologists and educators can optimize the chances of providing students with reading and writing practices, and thus contribute to the promotion of literacy.

CONCLUSION

With this study one can learn about the restrictions on the knowledge of a group of teachers regarding the concept of literacy, the concepts of written language, and its processes of appropriation. From this data, it was possible to identify limitations for the establishment of coherent and effective theoretical-practical associations for promoting significant practices in reading and writing, with the process of teaching/ learning of the Portuguese language in the early grades of elementary school of public state Parana.

Finally, attention should be drawn to speech-language pathologists being included inside the school network and their importance in focusing attention on the contribution that they can and should give the Brazilian educational system in that, being aware of the process of appropriation of writing from the perspective of literacy, they are decisively involved in continuing education for teachers. Thus, establishing a partnership relationship with the teacher, the speech-language pathologist can facilitate an improvement in the quality of Brazilian teaching dealing with teaching guidelines specified in the Portuguese Language National Curriculum and National Curriculum Guidelines, shaped by a perspective that takes language as a social and historic work.

RESUMO

Objetivo: analisar o conhecimento que um grupo de professores inseridos na rede pública do ensino fundamental tem sobre concepções de escrita e sobre o conceito de letramento. **Métodos:** os dados foram obtidos por meio da aplicação de questionário abrangendo formação profissional e conhecimento acerca da linguagem escrita e do letramento. Os questionários foram respondidos por escrito e individualmente, após assinatura do termo de consentimento livre e esclarecido. A análise estatística dos resultados foi realizada a partir do Teste de Fisher, ao nível de significância de 0,05 e do Teste qui-quadrado, ao nível de significância de 0,05. **Resultados:** não houve diferença significante entre o conhecimento dos professores acerca da concepção de linguagem escrita, letramento, alfabetização e dos motivos que levaram a incorporação do conceito de letramento no sistema educacional e o período de formação no magistério. Predominou, entre os professores, uma concepção de linguagem como código/instrumento e representação da fala (80%). Apesar de 80% dos professores terem realizado leitura de textos acerca do letramento e 84,8% identificar diferenças entre esse conceito e a alfabetização, apenas 12% estabeleceu adequadamente tal diferenciação. **Conclusão:** há restrições quanto ao conhecimento dos professores sobre concepções da escrita e, portanto, limitações para o estabelecimento de associações teórico-práticas efetivas para a promoção de práticas de leitura e escrita significativas, junto ao processo de ensino/aprendizagem da língua portuguesa nas séries iniciais do ensino fundamental. O estudo oferece elementos para o delineamento de propostas formuladas no campo da Fonoaudiologia voltadas à educação que objetivem a socialização de conhecimentos e a promoção do letramento.

DESCRITORES: Leitura; Escrita; Educação; Linguagem

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