

Fairy tales: an experiment in the literacy process with low-income children and teachers

Contos de fada – uma experiência no processo de alfabetização com crianças e professores das classes populares

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is the period from 1984 to 1996, when Basic Cycle Literacy and Single School Day were implemented in Sao Paulo. The research that went into preparing this paper centers on the problem of low-income children's access to and attendance or truancy in school, as well as a desire to propose new methods for teaching children to write and read. This research grew out of concern over the high number of children who are excluded from the literacy process and the poor performance of many children who study in our schools. In order to investigate the problem, 38 Basic Literacy Classes and their teachers, Portuguese teachers and 1,200 children (who did not attend preschool and had failed and were held back at least one grade) took part in a constructivist literacy proposal for low-income children. This study was based on the theories of Jean Piaget, Emilia Ferreiro, and Ana Teberosky, among others, for discussion, reflection and analysis of the activities done in the classroom. In the beginning, these activities produced a myriad of possibilities on how to proceed with the study because many of the activities, when re-evaluated, demonstrated that in collaboration with the teacher, there were many alternatives to how to get work done in the classroom. The teachers were analyzed and evaluated and they had our support in developing new strategies to help children learn how to write and read. The results showed us that children could not only acquire writing but could also use this skill outside of school. We also paid attention to the school's history in order to explain how it is now and to show our experiment, based on a constructivist theory, which presented some positive results.

Index terms: fairy tales; literacy, reading and writing; academic success; constructivism.

RESUMO

A investigação desse trabalho diz respeito aos anos compreendidos entre 1984 e 1996, período de vigência da implantação do Ciclo Básico de Alfabetização e da Jornada Única, no Estado de São Paulo. Esta investigação procurou levar em conta o problema de acesso e permanência ou evasão de crianças das classes populares, com proposta diferenciada de inovação em alfabetização. A pesquisa ora descrita nasceu de uma preocupação com o elevado número de crianças excluídas do processo de alfabetização e também pelo rendimento insatisfatório daquelas que se encontram matriculadas em nossas escolas. Durante a investigação trabalhamos com 38 classes e professores de Ciclo Básico, professores de Língua Portuguesa e aproximadamente 1.200 crianças (sem pré-escola e retidos) com uma proposta construtivista de alfabetização para crianças das classes populares. Fundamentamo-nos nas teorias de Jean Piaget, Emília Ferreiro, Ana Teberosky, e outros, para discussão, reflexão, análise e realização das atividades feitas em sala de aula pelas crianças. Essas atividades resultaram a princípio, em grande fonte de possibilidades para o prosseguimento das investigações, pois boa parte delas mostrava que, no repensar da prática, juntamente com o professor poder-se-ia propor alternativas de trabalho no cotidiano escolar. Assim, numa atividade coordenada - de preparo, aplicação, acompanhamento e avaliação do cotidiano do professor- foi observado como as crianças se apropriaram da escrita passando a utilizá-la num contexto extraescolar. Voltamos um breve olhar para a situação da escola nas décadas anteriores, com o intuito de situar melhor o contexto atual e apresentar uma experiência, inspirada na teoria construtivista, que nos levou a alguns resultados que julgamos positivos e animadores de novas experiências.

Palavras-chave: contos de fada, alfabetização/ leitura/ escrita, sucesso escolar, construtivismo.

1. Introduction

The goal of the study presented here is to show how assimilation of mechanisms of reading and writing occurs for exercising citizenship in a group of low-income children who, through innovative teaching, overcame their difficulties with "academic success or failure" in an experiment involving the rewriting of texts from fairy tales. When I refer to children's

success, I try to also point out the educational, theoretical and practical policy factors and legal norms that contributed to it. My experience as a literacy teacher, leader of the Foundation for Education Development for the Literacy Theory and Practice course, and pedagogical technical assistant in Basic Cycle Literacy has helped me in collecting and compiling various *data*, justifying "school success" among the children of the working classes.

This investigation sought to take into account the problem of access and attendance or truancy of the children of the working classes, with a differentiated proposal for literacy innovation. Therefore, this investigation grew out of concern over the high number of children who are excluded from the literacy process and the poor performance of those who were enrolled in our schools. During the investigation, we worked with a group of Portuguese teachers, Basic Cycle Literacy teachers and approximately 1,200 children (of the East Zone periphery of São Paulo, where a large portion of the low-income population lives) who had not attended pre-school and were held back for more than two or five years, with a constructivist literacy proposal for those children. We consider this number of students to be significant, once the increase in the number of vacancies and enrollment did not guarantee current students' permanence in schools nor the quality of education offered to them. The course *Literacy: theory and practice of the special projects of the Foundation for Education Development* (FDE) facilitated the research work, since it was through weekly meetings with a group of teachers, whom we were able to accompany in their students' building of knowledge for learning reading and writing. This study is based on the theories of Jean Piaget, Emilia Ferreiro, Ana Teberosky and others for discussion, reflection and analysis of in-class activities involving the rewriting of fairy tales. Our goal was to have schools act in a way that supported children's learning of reading and writing so that the students become producers of text in a broader social context, because according to Psychogenesis, the social task of teaching is the school's responsibility and

a child alone is not able to implement interaction with an object outside of school that she did not have the opportunity to know about. In the beginning, the creative activities designed for children resulted in a great source of possibilities for the continuation of investigation, because most of them showed us that the rethinking of instruction with the teacher would be able to propose alternatives to quotidian school life. Thus, in a coordinated activity of preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation with teachers, we could observe how children appropriated reading and writing and how they used them in settings outside of school in letters sent to the researcher and other participants of the process.

2. Methodology of research

It was in trying to detect the factors that contributed to the continuously high rates of children who lacked the ability to read and write in Basic Cycle Literacy that we began the experiment detailed here, hoping that its use would be one way of alleviating the problem. Starting from the premise that knowledge construction is a task that is particularly fitting for a teacher, the following questions were discussed during the course (*Literacy: theory and practice of the special projects of the Foundation for Education Development*): a) The problem of literacy among the low-income. b) The trinomial theory / prejudice / myth - "low-income children do not learn." c) The teacher as intervener in learning, developing readers and writers. d) The construction of knowledge, based on constructivist theory, combining applied theory to practice. e) The use of fairy tale texts to achieve the production of other cohesive and consistent texts. f) Alternative materials for work related to the project at hand. g) Suggested activities combining theory with practice. h) In conclusion, the acquisition and mastery of reading and writing.

As a starting point, we proposed activities with which teachers were already familiar in order to not hinder their freedom of action. To guide teachers' work, we prioritized: text/oral production - the emphasis on orality had the intention of valuing children's' linguistic competency in terms of their native language; text/written production - since teachers understood that children could read and write, even before acquiring the mechanisms of basic reading and writing, it was clear that we only learn to read by reading, and we only learn to write by writing, which made spontaneous the child's relationship with writing. At the beginning, the children were to hear a fairy tale

narrated by the teacher and rewrite it. Later, a fairy tale should be watched on television and rewritten and, finally, at another stage, children try to read and write a fairy tale based on their previous contact with children's literature.

We chose to present some of the children's' writing to compose the *corpus* of this article.



Cinderella – Patrícia Juliana – 7 years old¹

¹ We chose to leave the text in Portuguese so that the reader can compare the written work based on orality with the written work based on the rules of grammar of the Portuguese

*Era rei um filia e rei se caso.
 O rei morreu e a Cinderela ficou com a
 madasta.
 A madasta ficava chemmendo a
 Cinderela
 Cinderela cinderela javou javou.....
 Cinderela que ir comigo no baile
 meninas mispere e
 Secolar é meu e se vistido é meu
 –fada madrinha pegou a vara majica e
 empeistou o
 vistidio cinderela meia noite voce
 ficara sem o
 vistidio e sem a caroça e
 votaralnormau.....
 e ela foi a obaile e dansou com prisipi
 O jaé meia noite euprisiso eu vou
 imbora
 O ratinho pegou a xave do bonso e
 subiu ea prio
 O quarto e ela saio. E vivio felizes
 para sempre..*

language. In English, this text means: Cinderella - She was a princess and her father got married. Her father died and she was left with her stepmother. Her stepmother kept calling for her "Cinderella, Cinderella," and she answered: just a moment... "Cinderella, do you want to go with me to the ball? Girls wait for me. This necklace and this dress are mine." The Fairy Godmother took the magic wand and lent the dress to Cinderella ... "At midnight you'll be left without the dress and the carriage and will go back to normal..." She went to the ball and danced with the prince. "It's already midnight. I need go back home right now." The mouse took the key from the pocket and went upstairs to her room, she came out and they lived happily ever after.

In this rewrite, the marks of orality could be seen in the paragraphs, punctuation and accents, for example:

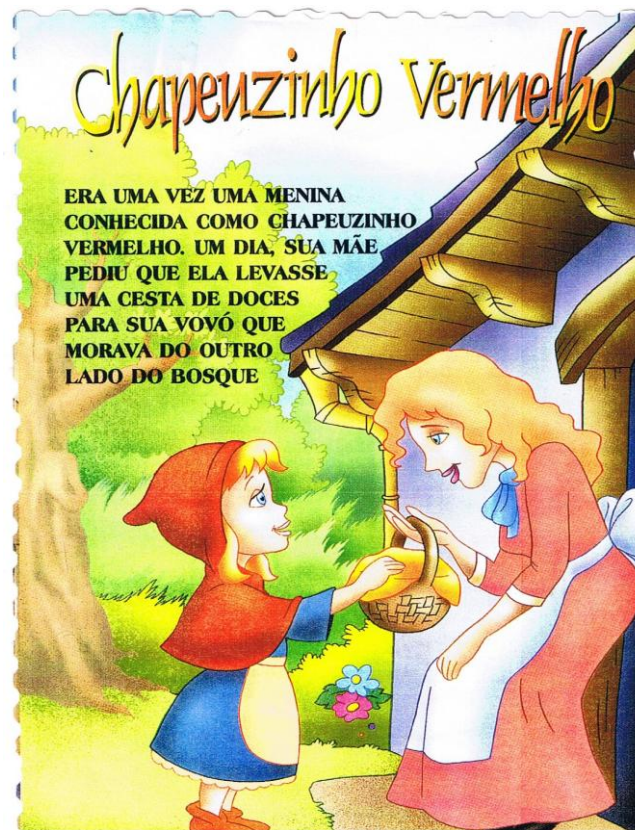
Cinderela! Cinderela! ²(Cinderela cinderela)

Já vou! Já vou! (javou javou)

Meninas me esperem! (meninas miespere)

Oh! Já é meia noite! Eu preciso ir embora. (O jáé meia noite euprisiso eu vou imbora)

E voltará ao normal (e votaralnoormau)



Little Red Riding Hood³ – Fábio Antonio – 12 years old

² We chose to leave the text in Portuguese so that the reader can compare the written work based on orality with the written work based on the rules of grammar of the Portuguese language. In English, this text means: Cinderella, Cinderella, Just a moment, just a moment, girls wait for me. Oh it's midnight, I need to go back home. And [she] will go back to being normal.

(1st writing sample) - 05/18/93

Student:

*eumveiseminina samada
chapaaeuinhovermeio
temcaipuetoca diu savezario.*

Correct Portuguese:

*Era uma vez uma menina chamada
Chapeuzinho Vermelho que tem
Capuz e toca que a vovó lhe deu
de aniversário.*

Student:

*- a mãe faisedozinho e minina vai
levaparavovo? Naofalalobomau
quelobooumau comeclinacia.*

Correct Portuguese:

*A mãe fez docinhos e disse,
menina leva para a vovó. Não fala
com o lobo mau que o lobo mau
come criancinha.*

Student:

*cqvssetafezenoaiseulobomau? (cqlê
como qui, qui).*

Correct Portuguese:

O que é que você está fazendo aí

³ The Portuguese translation of Little Red Riding Hood: *O Chapeuzinho Vermelho* We chose to leave the text in Portuguese so that the reader can compare the written work based on orality with the written work based on the rules of grammar of the Portuguese language. In English, this text means: Once upon a time there was a little girl named Little Red Riding Hood who had a hood that her grandmother gave her for her birthday. The mother made sweets and said, "Little girl, take them to Grandmother. Don't talk to the bad wolf because the bad wolf eats kids." "What are you doing there bad wolf?" "Smelling my little granddaughter."

seu lobo mau?

Student:

- geiramina netina.

Correct Portuguese:

Cheirar a minha netinha.



“O macaco e a velha”⁴ – Fábio Antonio – 12 years old

(2nd writing sample) – 06/17/93

- A velha morava laínsima do

moro.

E na casa e na frente tem o

jardim

⁴ We chose to leave the text in Portuguese so that the reader can compare the written work based on orality with the written work based on the rules of grammar of the Portuguese language. In English, this text means: The old lady lived on top of the hill. In front of her house she had a garden and in her backyard she had banana trees. The bananas were ripe but she couldn't reach to pick them. Then she saw the monkey walking back and called out to him. "Hey monkey, son of a *****. Get out of there you baby because if you don't, I'll hit you with a stick. Let go of me or I'll hit you with a stick."

*E a trais da casa tem pé de
 bananeiras
 Eai jatava madurinas e não da
 papega as banana.
 – Eai ela viu o macaco
 paseando e xamou o macaco.
 “Seu macaco filo da mãe”
 Sadai sua boneca senão vou tida
 um tapa pau
 Misouta sua boneca senão vou
 tida uma tapa prau”.*

Just like Patricia Juliana, Fabio Antonio has not yet mastered the resources offered by the Portuguese language. Therefore, he writes according to his hypotheses, making use of orality and transposing it to written production. Examples: “*lainsima*,” “*saidai*,” “*jatava*,” “*papega*” and “*misouta*.”⁵

We observed that in the rewrites there was always an introduction, interspersed small actions, followed by development and a conclusion of the text, maintaining in this way the logical sequence of actions. The endings come suddenly and sometimes, some characters appear only to fulfill their role and then disappear without any explanation, such as the fairy godmother.

In these rewrites, the marks of orality can be seen in the paragraphs, spelling, punctuation and accents. Other marks could be seen when the children searched for writing norms to produce their texts, such as parentheses, quotation marks, dashes, and question marks, often placed in

⁵ “*lainsima*” (*lá em cima*, in standard Portuguese, *up there* in English); “*saidai*” (*sai daí* in standard Portuguese, *get out of there* in English); “*jatava*” (*já estava* in standard Portuguese, *already was* in English); “*papega*” (*para pegar* in standard Portuguese, *to get* in English), and “*misouta*” (*me solta* in standard Portuguese, *let go of me* in English).

the text perhaps more by aesthetic or spatial hypothesis than with functional intent.

3. Results

After analyzing several writing samples, we explained to the group that the teacher, as intervener in the teaching-learning process, would show the children that when they replace the marks of orality with features that are specific to the text, the resulting structure would make it easier to do the rewrite and make their writing samples of higher quality. Our goal was to contribute to the development of the teachers' group so that the school would be supportive of teaching students to read and write through the use of fairy tales and that the students, in turn, would become producers of texts, "inserting" themselves into a broader social context.

We noted that the opportunity to apply the concepts acquired is what leads to children's learning. By teaching to learn, there was a concern among all of the teachers with the development and preparation of activities beyond the requirements of the school. Thus, our proposition with the group was for writing to transcend its exclusively academic appearance, think, act, and communicate with readiness, to reconstruct, construct and redefine the teachers' pedagogical practices.

In the process of writing fairy tales, we observed that the approach at the alphabetic to orthographic level, the children reviewed their hypotheses, making note of the form they had chosen. Initially, however, it was difficult for children to do the rewrite. They had assimilated an image of literacy as learning first the vowels, then simple and complex syllables and so on. By using the process of teaching and learning, based on the Pedagogical Policy Project at school, student/teacher work became a great challenge for the group, thus the theoretical knowledge that showed a large gap between

theory and practice became the object of reflection on teaching and learning in school.

Thus the group's work has opened many possibilities for reflection for changes in the process of school-based learning and pedagogical understanding as an option for this or that theory, as instrumental in organizing their actions as educators, including the student as the subject of learning.

According to Ferreiro and Teberosky:

The subject we met through Piaget's theory is a guy who actively seeks to understand the world around him, and tries to resolve questions caused by this world. He is not a subject who waits for someone that has the knowledge to give it to him in an act of kindness. He is a subject who learns primarily through his own actions on objects in the world and who builds his own categories of thought while organizing his world. Piaget's theory is not a particular theory about a particular domain, but rather a milestone theoretical reference, much broader, allowing us to understand in a new way "any" process of acquisition of knowledge. (1993, p. 26)

The study of these constructivist authors' theory contributed to the teachers understand of how learning occurs, the goals of basic education, and how to conduct their pedagogical intervention in the acquisition of reading and writing. Therefore, based on constructivist theory, the group could examine how the process of literacy happens, understand this process and seek to know what conceptions of written language the students have and how to use them as a social function. Thus, working with *texts of the fairy tales genre*, we could observe how children appropriated writing and how they used it in a context outside of school to communicate with others from various letters sent by children to the Director of the Foundation of Education Development, Santa Claus, and to the researcher, as per the following examples:

*Dear Mr. director of the Foundation*⁶

*I am writing you this letter to ask: for me and my peers to go to the Foundation ... We will not make any mess. Because the Foundation is a place for **sibilesada**⁷ people. It has to be this month because in another month we do not know if the teacher will be absent (Bruno, 9 years old).*

Letter to Santa Claus

Santa Claus

*I would love to get a barbi, which I've always wanted, but **nuca**⁸ could Have and I also want my mother to buy a house and my father to find a job quickly, and my godfather to solve his retirement **ploplemas**⁹ soon because it's a headache (Deborah, 10 years old).*

The use of writing as a social function also appeared in a process of dialogue between the children and the researcher. The letters, which came through the teachers, made it clear that children were making use of writing as a social function that is, using the "way of speaking through writing."

*I want to complain, that the teacher is giving a lot of lessons and history. And it's only lessons, she almost never gives us drawings for us to **pinta**¹⁰. When I get to class I already see homework, and I hope this will change (Alexander, 9 years old).*

⁶ The punctuation used in this translation follows the punctuation used in the original text to reflect the writing of the children who participated in the study and thus it does not follow the rules of Portuguese.

⁷ *sibilesada* is an attempt to write the word *civilizada* in Portuguese, which means *civilized* in English.

⁸ *nuca* is the attempt to write the word *nunca* in Portuguese, which means *never* in English. The mistake makes the sentence nonsensical as *nuca* means *the nape of the neck*.

⁹ *Ploplemas* is an attempt to write the word *problemas* in Portuguese, which means *problems* in English.

¹⁰ *Pinta* is an attempt to write the infinitive of the verb *pintar*, which is to paint in English.

*And now my peers and I are complaining a lot about all of the work that **nóis feiz**¹¹. And so much work that **nóis Feiz** I tell you! We want to do a project with drawing and glue, because we only do history and lessons and tests (Fernando, 9 years old).*

I am writing this letter about the work that you pass to the teacher and that she gives to us. My peers and I want you to send fewer assignments. Tell the teacher to stop giving us history books and long movies (Raphael, 12 years old).

*I'm happy with the class, the only problem is the teacher. The teacher doesn't show us movies, doesn't give us drawings, she doesn't tell stories, she only gives us problems and sentence corrections. I miss the stories we did. I would like to start **dinovo**¹² (Denise, 11 years old).*

I am writing this letter because I really miss our work together. I wish you were at school for us to have a conversation. And the teacher has nothing to do with this. But come soon, we're waiting (Cristiane, 10 years old).

I want to thank you in person, but it's not possible so: I will thank you through this piece of paper. I want to thank you because I know how to read and write and also the teacher because she has also taught me a lot (Francine, 9 years old).

From these texts (letters), written by children, it was possible to confirm the veracity of the truthfulness of Ferreiro's assertion:

Learning to write words, or recognize the words already written, is only a tiny portion of learning written language.

¹¹ *nóis feiz* is an attempt to write *nós fizemos* in Portuguese, which is *we did* in English.

¹² *Dinovo* is an attempt to write *de novo* in Portuguese, which in English is *again*.

Learning to "open" and "close" in writing is as important as learning how to do it in oral language. It is difficult to carry out successful communication face to face when you do not master the ways of opening and closing a conversation. When we do, we can say many things with a text, and when we let children speak (through writing), they really speak, and this can be alarming to educators. (1993, p.23)

Here the psychogenesis of written language made its fundamental contribution, demonstrating its evolutionary character in the acquisition of writing, proving its development in the cognitive elaborations of children in the production of texts. It was clear, though, that to teach literacy, we do not need to establish strict rules between sounds and letters, readiness, perception, motor coordination or maturity; we need only to offer children real learning situations, with alternatives and decision-making, so they leave the stage of oral language for practical acquisition of writing.

The *data* reported show us that the proposal of *fairy tales literacy* for low-income children worked as much for literacy - in the broadest sense of the word - as for the exercise of citizenship by little citizens, who were questioning the "power" established in the classroom.

4. Final thoughts

Through the use of the fairy tales methodology, we also observed that the information obtained through appropriation and transformation of meanings from the fairy tales, in a world full of miracles, showed the children that information contained in the written language of stories now can be used for communication. The literacy rate of nearly 92% among the children involved in the study showed that this communication, like the construction of knowledge, was due to the activities hitherto carried out with speaking, reading and writing, so reciprocally intertwined that we reached our goal: reading and writing text. For the researcher and the teachers, the use of language in the written productions was seen as a true

expression of culture, because it was common to all of the students' work. That is, we observed respect and freedom towards the ways in which a child expressed himself to achieve standards in order to communicate with others; interventions, which took place without interrupting the child's creative process, believing in his linguistic potential; ways to expand children's vocabulary; a great incentive for freedom of expression, so that each child within her possibilities, builds her own world view; limits are essential to development and thus there was sometimes a need for their establishment. They were needed according to individual structures, because we believe it is not enough to merely offer children learning opportunities and guide them accordingly, but to also, on several occasions, show them the necessary prohibitions because these mean support, or substantial security for the child; putting children in real writing situations so that, from certain confrontations, they could place themselves more realistically in the effective implementation of school learning in their daily lives.

The circulation of the children's productions showed us that they served, as a social function, to learn the world and confirm their ideas and thoughts about reading and writing in a world where oral culture and, especially, writing culture are very important for ideological development and achieving the dream of upward social mobility. This lesson that we consider to be significant, much more than the process of intellectual maturation, allowed construction of a process of self-discovery and an exercise in willingness to constitute a means of access to cultural goods and the pursuit of citizenship for children of the working classes, which began with the process of literacy. The permanence of the literacy teacher, with the same class during the two years of research, was considered convenient and beneficial from our pedagogical point of view, because it provided the opportunity to give continuity to teaching-learning without reviewing content for students who are at a lower grade-level of proficiency. Furthermore, we took into consideration the child as a human being that has

come to school with linguistic potential. This potential, explored through fairy tales, became, during the investigation, faster and more convenient to transform the learning process into teaching content. In summary, so that newly-discovered ways become a truly effective learning process, it was deemed appropriate to accompany the teacher when it came time to turn theory into practice, guiding him in the way to interfere with the acquisition of reading and writing through changes in his attitude and approach in the classroom.

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