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The academic fields of study in literacy and reading in Brazil: Conditions and perspectives in Applied Linguistics research

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ABSTRACT

Over the past forty years, we have witnessed the emergence of a new academic field of research in Brazil called literacy, which resulted in a revolution in the understanding of the definition and boundaries of literacy and research in Applied Linguistics. In this brief study, the motivations and the general aspects of this academic field will be discussed, pointing out the need to define its predominantly multidisciplinary nature, which exceeds the limits of the classical notions of structure and incommensurable paradigms.

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Since the last century, dozens of national and regional policies and programs have been developed for the Brazilian school system with the purpose of eradicating school exclusion and ensuring the right to universal access to alphabetic writing and literacy. Although universal access to public schools has been achieved in the entire country, innumerable problems with regard to the adequate universal access to alphabetic writing and literacy still persist. Despite all progress of the Brazilian society over the past two decades, schools have failed to provide literacy and reading education to certain social groups who are historically marginalized in the country and continuously fail to learn, remaining either in absolute condition of illiteracy or functional illiteracy. This paper analyzes the emergence and epistemological features of the academic field that has been called Applied Linguistics to literacy and reading, or simply field of literacy and reading with the purpose of describing the effort of producing scientific knowledge specifically designed for teacher training and dealing with the problem of social exclusion caused by illiteracy. The difficulty in seeing the student as a real person from the perspective of the practice of science is discussed, in which the student is characterized as a product of the paradigmatic nature of the hypotheses and theories in human sciences, as found in the studies of Kuhn and Levy-Strauss. The epistemological problem that hinders the use of empirical research as a tool to minimize the difference between scientific concepts and the description of students as real people is defined by using the phenomenological aspects pointed out by Florestan Fernandes as reference. Finally, the genesis of the field of literacy and reading is analyzed, specifically from the contributions of textual linguistics and speech pragmatics, as well as from the advent of the theory of Psychogenesis of the written language. Based on the above-mentioned, it is possible to characterize an epistemological trans-paradigmatic model guided by principles of objectivity and interpretative commensurability pointed out by Kuhn.

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1. The problem: seeing students and not seeing people

To start discussing the problem in the academic field of contemporary literacy and reading regarding teacher training, allow me to break the academic protocol that governs the practice of scientific and technical articles. I do so with the endeavor of enabling open communication between the world of researchers and the world of basic education teachers.

Interesting people are our students; so familiar, but yet so foreign when seated at the school desks. The diversity among students tend to counter most hypotheses that we formulate about them out of school probably because the hypotheses that induce us to understand them are not established from the principle of diversity, chance and individual singularities of each one of them. Diversity scares us and we tend to understand it as a sign of disorder or learning failure, both situations that we try to prevent from occurring by teaching ideally and homogeneously grouped students who are equal one to another. Sometimes, as a researcher, students, schools and education really exasperate me, lead me to the edge of reason. However, it is precisely there, at the edge of academic reason that education is revealed in all its grandeur, the exact moment when the teacher speaks louder and students – people dressed as students – become more important than any hypotheses which have been formulated about them. The academic order under which our hypotheses about students and schools are derived from a concept of a stable world, safeguarded in the laboratory, inhabited by ideal structures and individuals with a desire for absolute control over the reality of the world, but hopelessly trapped in utopia, as the universe of a romantic poet. However, the reality of the world is concrete poetry, whose verses, or re-verses, reveal our real students, human beings. As teachers we frequently realize that the knowledge produced by academic–scientific practices does not provide us with the conditions to work with real school students, despite its appeal to truth and understanding of the rites that ensure eloquence in the intellectual community. Perhaps it is probably why more teachers graduate from master’s and doctoral programs – even in the area of education – and we see them migrate from basic education to higher education, the latter being the real Eden of scientific knowledge where all romanticism of the researcher is welcome and one is relatively in a conflict-free environment. Indeed, there is a profound gap between the academic concept of the school individual and the real student with whom we interact in public or private schools throughout this country called Brazil. Under the conditions imposed upon us in the academic and scientific culture, the theoretical construction of the subjects we discuss in theory and the research developed in research centers are nothing more than an epistemological part of the real individuals, a fragment of the student.

The difference in perception between the epistemological image of the professor/researcher and the teacher is certainly irrevocable. If they do not become the base and production processes of academic knowledge, the real flesh and blood people will remain unreachable, once the inconstant and unpredictable nature of real human beings is something that we have not yet satisfactorily depicted in the academic discourse. No wonder, therefore, we tend to turn people into objects of research taking one of their distinctive traits, not more than one, on which we focus during research. A trait, a single fragment of a person, is what we choose to study during each research endeavor, but despite all the rigor used to conduct the study, we will never find the truth from it that may be attributed to the entire person, the one that was our primary motivation and that was lost when a single trait was left.

Naturally, we would be naive if we thought that there is not a single bond between academic individuals and the real people that they depict. This bond, however, is an academic exercise based on the belief in the abstract individual, a symbolic allegory called “*structure*”, that the human sciences fabricated. Even nowadays, more than a century later since the revolution occurred in humanist thought, the concept of primary structure is still preserved, surviving even within the postmodern pragmatism, no longer under the label of structuralist thought, but in the form of an epistemological condition from which the awareness of the reality of things themselves is not sufficient to turn them into a research phenomena, because our view of things does not reveal their entirety, but rather the parts that sensitize us.

The great danger of the concept of structure in human sciences does not reside in the notion itself, but how the academic community uses it. Despite its eminently hypothetical nature, given the impossibility of achieving the real truth from one of its fragments, the judgment resulting from academic research is often taken as true in itself and, what is even more dangerous, widespread as if it were the true reality.

Since our initial training in undergraduate programs, we as teachers are led to understand the student from the judgment that a certain group of researchers formulated based on a particular trait of real individuals. We know that from the practice of teacher education it is better to believe in the judgments formulated by groups of professors than to suspect that none of them properly describes any real world individual.

2. Paradigms and ideal students

When the three following factors – a given hypothesis about reality, a set of principles that define the ideal conditions to analyze reality in terms of the hypothesis to be verified, and a set of evaluation criteria that are applied to verify the understanding of these ideal conditions specific for the production of knowledge – are united, a paradigm is established, in accordance to the classical definition by Kuhn (1962). The introduction of the concept of paradigm within the practices of academic scientific knowledge production was the most relevant milestone in the replacement of the prescriptive normative model of knowledge production, which had been practiced in the academic culture until the nineteenth century. From then on, the awareness established was that no system of academic value – no theoretical construct – could be considered as the true description of the nature of reality, but as just a possible interpretation, the best way to describe it based on the

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