

# LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE PRE-SCHOOL YEARS: LEARNING ABOUT TEACHERS' LEARNING THROUGH AN IN-SERVICE PROGRAM

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## Abstract

This paper draws on research into pre-school teachers' understandings of language education. The inquiry focused on an in-service professional learning program specifically designed to enable pre-school teachers to improve their knowledge of language education. Mixed methods of data collection and analysis were employed in an effort to gain insight into the quality of the learning they accomplished. The results showed that the participants in this in-service program had indeed accomplished significant professional learning, but they also revealed some of the complexities of in-service learning of this kind. A case study is presented that shows how one of the participants wrote her way into an understanding of the complexities of language education, using language to learn about language. The research suggests that a robust rationale for promoting pre-school teachers' learning should focus not only on content knowledge in order to enable them to improve their awareness of the role of language in pre-school education, but that it should also be conceptualized and implemented according to socio-constructivist principles that currently frame pre-school education. This means acknowledging where the educators are coming from, and enabling them to transform their existing knowledge through actively engaging with new theoretical frameworks, writing and discussing their work with others and reflecting on their on-going professional practice.

**Key words:** Pre-school teachers' professional learning, professional development, pre-school education, language education, (pedagogical content) professional knowledge

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A considerable political effort has been made to improve early childhood education in the last two decades in Portugal. After a period of a non-existent or rudimentary concern (Vasconcelos, 2000), a *Program for the Development of Pre-School Education* (Ministério da Educação, 1996) was officially initiated in 1996, leading to the definition, in 1997, of a *Framework Law for the Pre-School Education* (Diário da República, 1997). This legal text was a pioneering document in defining pre-school education as *the first step in basic education seen as part of lifelong education and (complementing) the education provided by the family* (Framework Law, article 2), and it opened the way to a huge expansion of the network of pre-schools in Portugal (Vasconcelos, 2006).

In the same year, the *National Curriculum Guidelines for Pre-School Education* (Departamento de Educação Básica, 1997) were published. These broad pedagogical orientations represented a paradigmatic shift in the understanding of pre-school pedagogy, being in line with socio-constructivist aims and principles that have been identified as most adequate for pre-school children and the way they learn (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002; OECD, 2001, 2006). In particular, the development of a lifelong disposition to learn (more than a strict sensorial and motor preparation for later formal schooling) through a holistic approach to early development and education was assumed, centred on children, recognizing them as agents of their own learning and respecting their natural learning strategies: play, active learning, expression through language and other media, learning from relationships with significant others and informal research in matters of interest or concern to them<sup>1</sup>.

As in the pre-school 'curricula' of many other countries (OECD, 2006), language and literacy, organized around the dimensions of *Oral language* and *Approaches to Writing*, were clearly identified in these guidelines as areas of socio-construction by children and intentional development by teachers. Again, this concern with language education in the pre-school years represented a paradigmatic shift, especially with respect to written language, which had not been regarded as a matter of development before the beginning of primary school (Dionísio & Pereira, 2006):

The acquisition and learning of oral language has until now had a fundamental importance in pre-school education by thinking that reading and writing should only take place in primary school. It is nowadays indisputable that approaching the written language is also part of pre-school education. (Departamento de Educação Básica, 1997: 67, my translation)

Since 2008, several texts have been published by the Ministry of Education aiming to help teachers better understand those guidelines and sustain their curricular decisions, one of which is dedicated to oral language and language awareness de-

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<sup>1</sup> *The setting, in 2010, of the National Standards for Pre-School Education seems not to be in line with this philosophy (Pereira, 2011).*

velopment (Sim-Sim et al., 2008) and another to the discovery of print in the pre-school (Mata, 2008). In effect, besides the legal, financial and curricular concerns, teachers' professionalism has also received political attention in the recent history of pre-school education in Portugal. In 1997, the government determined that pre-school teachers completed a four-year university degree, and an official initiative was launched to encourage teachers already working to raise their professional qualification (in the form of a 3-year certification diploma) to a 4-year degree level through a complementary diploma (OECD, 2000)<sup>2</sup>.

Despite all these efforts, much evidence exists that Portuguese pre-school teachers do not have the necessary professional knowledge to implement the official guidelines (Katz et al., 1998; OECD, 2000, 2006). Teachers show varied profiles and school practices hardly consistent with the new pedagogical principles and aims (Afonso, 2006; Vasconcelos, 2006), and this state of affairs has not passed unnoticed in the international studies in which Portugal has taken part.

In fact, having detected the prevalence, in many pre-school classrooms, of "formal structured learning, focused on fairly narrow aspects of cognitive development" (OECD, 2000:34), the OECD country note on Portugal clearly expressed the need for professional in-service training to help "practitioners (...) to become more reflective (...) and to take more responsibility for their professional development" (idem: 32) in order to facilitate the implementation of the guidelines and thus raise the quality in pre-school education. This suggestion was generally reinforced in the 2001 and 2006 OECD reports:

Education is a key to development, and educators are the key to successful early childhood programmes. The realisation is growing that the work of early childhood professional staff is complex, and that sound training is required. (OECD, 2006: 217)

Unsurprisingly, a lack of professional learning opportunities has also been reported as far as language education is concerned. Vasconcelos (2006) refers to the heterogeneity of practices and the limited proposals aimed at promoting literacy development. Lopes & Fernandes (2009) report how most pre-school teachers they studied attributed an almost exclusive importance to the development of oral language, written language receiving less or even no attention at all, which they take as evidence to argue for the need to promote teachers' learning about this dimension of language education. Dionísio & Pereira (2006) and Lopes & Fernandes (2009) argue that the research that has been done at the universities has only reached a limited target public of younger professionals in a systematic way, who nevertheless hardly find a job in the public network of pre-schools, older teachers having few if any opportunities for professional development in this area.

As far as I can see it, the lack of professional learning opportunities stands up as a particularly relevant detail in this problematic state of affairs in that, like any oth-

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<sup>2</sup> In 2007, a new requirement was established that pre-school teachers complete a master's degree. However, it will not be referred to in this paper as the first teachers to complete it have not yet finished their degrees.

er learner, teachers do need external mediation in order to fully assimilate new knowledge (Vygotsky, 1995; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Mercer, 1995). Thus, when professional learning contexts are rare or even non-existent, a danger is run of not learning (or not learning very effectively) and, thus, of failing to develop professional autonomy as expected. I myself have come across a great deal of evidence of this lack of professional development as far as language education is concerned among pre-school teachers. Much of this evidence usually comes to my knowledge through the reflections of the pre-service teachers that I supervise. Those written reflections have made it progressively clear to me that most pre-school teachers often reveal intuitive, non-theorised language education practices, though they struggle to articulate a theoretical framework that might justify what they do and thus enhance their capacity to address the needs of the children in their care.

In a country that has been showing low levels of literacy (Benavente et al., 1996), but which officially assumes pre-school education as the laying foundations for lifelong literacy learning, this professional misadjustment has become a matter of political unease.

All the above mentioned evidences point to the need of finding ways to enable preschool educators to engage in effective professional learning, supporting their efforts to appropriate the official guidelines and implement them in their own practice. This means focusing on the nature of their professional learning, including the preconditions for its effectiveness. The research presented in this paper was carried out in order to reach a better understanding of pre-school teachers' professional learning about language education. The prompt for the inquiry was an instance of an in-service training program specifically designed to help pre-school teachers improve their professional knowledge about language education. The next section gives an account of the in-service program and what it tried to accomplish. I describe the political and institutional conditions that made it possible, also outlining its theoretical foundations and the general procedures that were followed. After detailing the research methodology that I followed in the study, I analyze some of the data that were collected, illustrating participants' learning and identifying factors that seem to have intersected to determine that learning. Such findings unveil some of the complexities of this process of professional development, and, in the final section, I offer an interpretation about their relevance for designing future professional development programs about language education for pre-school teachers.

## 2. AN IN-SERVICE PROGRAM FOR THE PROMOTION OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE PRE-SCHOOL YEARS

The in-service program that provides the prompt for this inquiry into professional learning was developed under special political and institutional circumstances. It was carried out within the wider context of a ministerial in-service program, initiated in 2007, aiming to improve Portuguese primary teachers' knowledge of lan-

guage and literacy education. Universities and other teacher training institutions all over the country were responsible for its implementation. At each institution, a group of primary teachers went through a 'train the trainer program' in language and literacy education so that they could do 'peer training and practice supervision' back in their school centres.

In the meantime, an unofficial challenge was also made so that those same institutions autonomously developed an in-service training program for pre-school teachers. At the University of Minho, covering one Portuguese geographical district, both programs were developed and coordinated by myself, and I was responsible for conceiving, accrediting and coordinating the implementation of the program for pre-school teachers.

Two key assumptions sustained my decisions when designing the in-service program, both supported by my reading of the literature about professional development of teachers. One was that the most powerful kind of professional learning happens through reflection on practice (Dewey, 1971; Schön, 1983; Zeichner & Liston, 1996; Day, 1999; Marcos, Miguel & Tillema, 2009), and the other was that the most powerful forms of reflection happen when reflection is informed by theory (Day, 1993; Shulman, 1987).

### *2.1 The theoretical perspective about language education in the pre-school years*

I designed the program attending to some theoretical dimensions that in my view are central to the understanding of language education in the pre-school years. My perspective has resulted from my own research as a pre-school teacher educator in language education as well as from my acknowledgement of the role of different dimensions of knowledge in the construction of teachers' professionalism (Shulman, 1987). Different theoretical sources thus converge in my view, from general socio-cultural theories of learning to linguistic, psychological and socio-constructivist theories of language learning, which I detail below. My aim was to help teachers develop an understanding that language education in the pre-school years is a crucial yet singular and complex process that pursues special purposes. In particular, I wanted to guide teachers into the recognition that language education during the period from 3 to 6 years of age has many peculiarities, the most relevant being the fact that it implies the nurturing of natural linguistic developments that children go through as well as the inevitable introduction of children to cultural dimensions of language knowledge and use. I wanted pre-school teachers to have the opportunity to recognise each of these dimensions of language education by discussing either content or specific pedagogic knowledge, taking the curricular guidelines as a frame of discussion (Shulman, 1987).

The idea was discussed that the set of children's universal language practices (such as the ability to communicate with others in order to satisfy needs, informally construct knowledge about the immediate, surrounding world and give form to fantasy, make-believe worlds) *is enabled by a natural basis*.

In fact, language was presented to teachers as a biological endowment (Chomsky, 1965). Besides the faculty of language, other universals of the human mind (such as categorization (Markman, 1994), narrativity (Bruner, 1988), and the development of a theory of mind (Perner, 1991; Baron-Cohen, 1995) were evoked to help teachers understand that, as far as the development of language in the pre-school years is concerned, most part of the 'job' is unconsciously and spontaneously done by children themselves.

Teachers became aware that, coinciding with the critical period of the natural development of language (Lenneberg, 1967), language education in the pre-school years must therefore provide children with the necessary social scaffolding (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976) that nurtures those innate capacities. Teachers' attention was focused on central features of situated interaction that, in school contexts, simulate the very same features that are shown by the interaction of exceptional nurturing parents (Bruner, 1990; Lentin, 1981; Wells, 1987; Williams, 2001). Authentic transcripts of teacher-children interactions were analyzed.

However important this nurturing is, language education in the pre-school years is expected to further extend 'basic' language capacities into socially specific, non-spontaneous and non-universal dimensions of language knowledge and use. Another way put, language education during the years that precede formal education is also intended to initiate children into the language abilities and practices that are *culturally specific to their social group*, mostly related to literacy practices. Therefore, pre-school teachers' attention was also directed into this other major dimension of language education. Language awareness and literacy were the two main aspects of the cultural dimension of language education in the pre-school years that were studied.

Promoting language awareness was presented as helping children to take language as an object of reflection. Phonology, word and basic aspects of syntax were presented as likely objects of reflection in pre-school years, and attention was drawn to the relevance of promoting this non-communicative language ability, helping children focus on language as such, an ability that is known to be relevant in their future formal learning of the written language (Adams et al., 1998; Alves Martins, 1996).

Literacy was defined as a set of social practices that are used to make meanings in which specialized language forms are used (either the written code or specialized genres and registers of language) and in which specific meaning making procedures are activated, for instance, to understand or produce texts. The idea was discussed that educating children in literacy in the pre-school years consists in helping them construct an *emergent literacy*, that is, an informal knowledge about different literacy worlds and aspects of the written code (Clay, 1966; Downing, 1971; Ferreiro, 1986; Mata, 2008) as well as a familiarization with specific procedures to make meanings that are to be found in their social group and formally learnt at school (Wells, 1987; Williams, 2001; Hasan, 2001, 2002).

With the exception of syllabic awareness, the development of which seems to be sustained by human natural language endowments (Bertoncini & Mehler, 1981), none of those cultural dimensions of language knowledge and use appears to develop spontaneously in children's minds. The need to intentionally create the conditions to promote the construction of such cultural knowledge by children in the classroom was thus brought to discussion. Basic principles that guide the pedagogy of these cultural dimensions of language learning in the pre-school years were discussed, such as actively participating with more knowledgeable peers as well as with teachers in literacy practices that are representative of diverse literacy worlds that are 'simulated' in the classroom (Wells, 1999; Barsalou, 1999), and being interactively prompted to informally pay attention to, think about and question aspects of oral and written language. Throughout this discussion, authentic scripts and/or illustrations of these pedagogic procedures were also provided for reflection and comment.

In order to make the general understanding described above accessible to participants, the training sessions were initially and explicitly organized according to the very same categories or dimensions that organize the official guidelines, namely 'oral language' and 'written language'. For me, one of the most important advantages of using familiar terminology was, precisely, the fact that it helped teachers to progressively induce, discuss and theorize the opposition between natural and cultural dimensions in language education in the pre-school years. And of particular relevance was the fact that this organization opened up the possibility of exploring the complexity of *oral language education in the pre-school years*.

*Table 1: The contents and organization of the in-service program on language education in the pre-school years*

| INSET program    |          |                             | General understanding on language education |
|------------------|----------|-----------------------------|---|
| Structure        | Contents |                             |   |
| Oral language    | Module 1 | Basic language action       | Development of natural capacities           |
|                  |          | Specialised language action | Development of cultural dimensions          |
|                  | Module 2 | Language awareness          |   |
| Written language | Module 3 | Emergent literacy           |   |

I wanted teachers to understand the complexity of oral language development by helping them to appreciate that it comprises the development of biological as well as of cultural dimensions. Three aspects were studied and discussed: the development of basic oral language action (defined as oral practices that are universally developed by children), the development of specialized oral language action and the development of language awareness. The latter two were defined as cultural language practices, not common to all individuals in the whole world, being representative of practices that take place, for example, in school contexts (Williams, 2001; Hasan, 2001, 2002). The view on language education studied in the program is systematized in Table 1.

## *2.2 The reflective process*

By sharing theoretical knowledge with pre-school teachers, I therefore wanted them to be aware of the possibility and desirability of developing a rich language pedagogy, one that is actually allowed by (but not made explicit in) the official guidelines, by bringing into the lives of their children rich language and literacy practices. When designing the in-service program procedure, I wanted teachers to know this general view about language education in the pre-school years through reflection in and on practice, as reflection is assumed to be the driving force in the professional learning of teachers (Dewey, 1971; Schön, 1983; Zeichner & Liston, 1996; Day, 1999; Marcos, Miguel & Tillema, 2009). That is to say, I wanted them to transform this view about language by enabling them to apply it into their professional practice while simultaneously building on and confronting their previous experience (Dewey, 1971), thus (re)creating knowledge that is relevant for themselves (Shulman, 1987).

In order to make practical reflection possible, the in-service program took the form of a 'focused action-research' process, combining "a fusion between trainer-centred input and teacher-centred action research" (Perret, 2003:1). Action (or practitioner) research is a suitable methodological procedure when a practical problem exists that needs to be addressed, requiring some change to one's practice, as seemed to be the case. Action research is also widely recognized as a successful methodology in promoting the professional development of teachers (Elliot, 1991; Day, 1999; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1987).

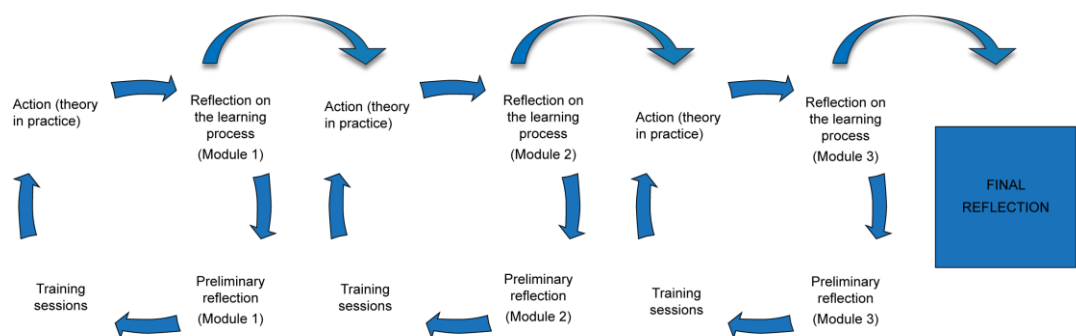
The in-service program was carried out by 23 primary teachers who were simultaneously developing the in-service program for primary teachers, and it was implemented at the same places. There, an interaction was established between 'quasi-peer' teachers: teachers of different levels whose students are actually the same and whose professional responsibilities and interests, therefore, intersect. A collegial training relationship was thus created, which, together with the development of the program in the contexts of practice, are referred to as suitable learning environments for teachers (Day, 1999).



The trainers imparted 10 lecture-discussion sessions (total: 25 hours), divided into the three thematic modules, for which they received special training with me as well as the core materials to be used in each of the sessions. Besides the training period, pre-school teachers were asked to take the ideas into their real practical contexts and then to share their new experiences back in following meetings. That is to say, besides the group dynamics, there was an individual learning component during which pre-school teachers were expected to inspect their own language education conceptions and practices within the educational settings in which they worked.

Teachers were asked to record all their learning through the construction of an individual portfolio. The use of written language as a support for professional learning through reflection is well documented in the literature (Eisner, 2006; Doecke & McClenaghan, 2011; Rosen, 1985; Langer & Applebee, 1987), the metacognition dimension it introduces into (adult) learning clearly being its most powerful potential (Marcos, Miguel & Tillema, 2009). The construction of the portfolio was interspersed with the theoretical training period. Before the study of each module, teachers were asked to report one practical task they considered to be representative of the issue *to be studied*; after the thematic sessions had been held and teachers applied what they had learnt in their own classrooms, they were expected to reflect on the whole process, their initial report standing up as a reference point to help them *make explicit what they thought they might have learned in the meantime*. Thus, this in-service program was carefully designed to let learning be identified and carefully monitored by the teachers themselves. Theory was intentional and systematically used to support teachers' inquiries into their own language education, knowledge and practices, consciously re-theorizing these dimensions of their work as preschool educators (Schön, 1983; Day, 1993, 1999; Oliveira-Formosinho, 2009). The general training procedure is schematised in Figure 1.

This process took 3 to 5 months, according to the dynamics that were negotiated at each school centre. More than 350 pre-school teachers took part in the in-service program, which took place in 2010 in most cases.



*Fig. 1: The in-service training program as an action-research process.*

### 3. INVESTIGATING PRE-SCHOOL TEACHERS' LEARNING ABOUT LANGUAGE EDUCATION

The research was prompted by my interest in deepening the understanding of pre-school teachers' professional learning about language education. The research was developed with two central objectives: to characterize pre-school teachers' conceptual needs about language education in the pre-school years (by analysing the degree of knowledge construction) and to identify factors that might have influenced learning construction.

The whole in-service program created a unique context for carrying out an exploratory case study (Yin, 1994) in order to attain those research objectives. Being a case study, the findings of this research cannot be assumed as "generalizable to populations and universes" but just to "theoretical propositions" (Yin, 1994:3). In fact, like other case studies in general, my prime concern was conceptual (Miles & Huberman, 1994:31), intending to contribute to "expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization)" (Yin, 1994:10). In fact, it seemed to me that by researching this instance of professional development of pre-school teachers I could contribute to theorize about the process, taking the case of language education as a specific area of discussion.

Data were collected through (i) a final on-line survey and (ii) teachers' individual portfolios. In the survey, teachers were asked about their personal profiles (age and academic degree) as well as about their perceptions about the knowledge they thought they had constructed, either generally or specifically in each module, either in absolute terms or in comparison to what they thought to be their previous knowledge. They were able to indicate this growth in the form of a likert scale (0-6). These data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics to assess the degree of knowledge construction and to establish correlations between this learning and age and academic degree.

However important this data might be in order to attain my research objectives, I considered that such quantitative analysis should be complemented by the interpretative analysis of teachers' portfolios. A general structure was initially suggested for the portfolios: for each module, teachers were asked to systematize the theoretical learning constructed; then, to report an example of a practice intentionally informed by (some) of the theory learned; to provide an analysis of the practices that were implemented; and, finally, to recover each of the reflections written previously for the study of each module and explicitly identify learning constructed in the meantime. The qualitative analysis of portfolios was thought to identify relevant segments that revealed this cycle of teachers' learning.

The quantitative analysis has now been completed. The analysis of the portfolios is still ongoing. However, I am in a position to reflect on what I have learned thus far, and the remainder of this essay will focus on that learning.

#### 4. FINDINGS

The results obtained so far have prompted some lines of discussion that I find highly relevant in the light of the purposes that instigated the research.

##### *4.1 Pre-school teachers' learning about language education*

The data about personal profiles in the 346 valid questionnaires collected clearly showed that the participants were a very experienced group of teachers (91,46% teachers were above 40 years old). When analyzing the results of the items that asked for teachers' perceptions about the knowledge they thought they had acquired, I found strong evidence that they felt they had developed new knowledge and that their understanding of children's language education had been considerably enhanced during the in-service program.

In the items that asked for teachers' general assessment of what they had learned, more than 89% of them answered that the acquisition and reinforcement of knowledge was equal or superior to 5 in the likert scale, with the acquisition (89,65%) receiving a slightly higher percentage than the reinforcement (89,06%). When comparing the answers to the items that asked for teachers' previous familiarity with the concepts under study in each of the three modules to their answers to the items that asked for the degree of understanding they had achieved, a statistically relevant difference showed up for *all* the items, indicating that teachers clearly considered they ended up knowing more about all the issues they had studied than they knew before.

In my view, such strong quantitative findings offer a powerful reason to further inquiry into the portfolios. I would like to introduce here the portfolio of one particular teacher that has drawn my attention. She follows the cycle of self-inquiry that was suggested in a very explicit manner, clearly evidencing the professional growth that the results of the survey point to.

##### *4.2 Pre-school teachers' learning about language education: A case within the case*

*Maria*, a pseudonym, has been a pre-school teacher for nearly 20 years. She has a three-year certification diploma and she did not enrol in the official program aimed at raising her initial graduation to a degree that was launched by the Portuguese government in the 90's. When I became aware of this information about her personal profile, her narrative struck me even more because of her learning and her learning process that she lets us perceive.

Maria's portfolio follows the general structure that was initially suggested to teachers, being organized in four different parts. In each of the first three parts, she starts by systematizing the theoretical learning she constructed in each module. It is very interesting to find that she brought into these syntheses research she herself made beyond the readings that were given to her. A very interesting example is revealed in her theoretical reflection about module 1. She quotes a passage from a text she downloaded from the internet on December the 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010 about the natural dimension of language development<sup>3</sup> (Evidently, the idea that pre-school education coincides with the critical period of natural language development struck her:

There are people who assume the existence of a critical period for the acquisition of the language competence, beyond which children could not (or would not so easily) communicate through language. This critical period is the 'moment in which the child brain is endowed of an extraordinary plasticity for a given cognition and can mediate, without any conscious effort, the concrete development of proper neural circuits for mastering one or more natural languages. (...) This critical period can extend until when the child is seven years-old'. (portfolio excerpt, my translation)

Then, in each of the three initial parts, she proceeds by reporting the examples of practices that she developed with her own group of children and that were informed by (some) of the theory she learned. When writing about her practices to promote language awareness in the pre-school (module 2), she reports:

Taking children's age (3 to 4) into consideration, it seemed to be more adequate to do an initiation activity. Some drawings were presented to children in a blank page, 12 drawings with an empty square next to them. Children said, aloud and together, the names of the objects that were represented in the drawings: *spinning top, violin, cat, bottle, ball, scissors, carrot, shoe, bell, lion, giraffe, coil* [*pião, violino, gato, garrafa, bola, tesoura / leão, sino, sapato, girafa, mola, cenoura*, pairs of rhyming words in Portuguese]. Then, each should use the same colours to paint the squares corresponding to the pair of rhyming words. The aim was that the children identify equal oral segments in words. By directing their attention to these oral segments (those which rhyme), children begin *to be aware* of the sounds in words. (portfolio excerpt, original italics, my translation)

Again, in each of the three initial parts, Maria makes an analysis of the practices that she implemented, which she calls *critical reflection*, considering children's gains and difficulties as well as her own role in the whole process. This analytical part is especially detailed in module 3.

In fact, the synthesis of the theoretical foundations she learned in that module (and the connections she makes to the learning she had constructed in the previous modules) is quite impressive, as it will be made clear in her own words below. Again she looks for information beyond the reading sources that were provided, relating her discussion about the concept of literacy into the word *littera* to highlight the

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<sup>3</sup> [www.letas.ufrj.br/clipsen/linguistica\\_1/texto1.doc](http://www.letas.ufrj.br/clipsen/linguistica_1/texto1.doc) (Aniela Improta França / UFRJ, p. 4).

continuity there exists between oral language practices, in children, and the learning of reading and writing. Enough to consider that written letters (literacy comes from *littera* – letter) are symbols for phonemes, that is, ways of representing sounds. There is a relationship between the sounds and letters. The child that has become aware of the sounds in words has more facility in the learning of writing and reading. Oral language and writing influence each other reciprocally. (portfolio excerpt, original italics, my translation)

Still in her theoretical considerations, she gives strong emphasis to the fact that, like any other form of learning, the learning of literacy begins with a *cognitive phase* (Downing, 1971), a concept that had been discussed in the training sessions as contrasting to traditional views of learning in the pre-school and primary grades. She was obviously very impressed by the discussion of the idea that the construction of progressively clear ideas about the functionality and the nature of written language

develops mainly in the family and in the pre-school and it is called 'emergent literacy'. (...) According to a classic conception, before entering primary school, only the normal psychomotor development was fostered. This conception (...) did not pay attention to the ideas that a child constructs about written language before she learns how to read and write nor to the importance of such previous ideas in that formal learning. They are the first phase of the learning of literacy. (portfolio excerpt, my translation)

She then reports a practice she developed with her children. Together they wrote a letter to Santa Klaus, and she used this context to informally but intentionally assess some aspects of her children's emergent literacy. The analysis she provides of what she observed and heard is again very impressive for what she reveals about her capacity to transform theory and use it into her practice, in this case, a formative assessment practice. She begins by stating that "First of all, there is much confusion. As it would be expected, there are no clear ideas". And then she goes on detailing her findings. For instance, she acknowledges that

When asked the name of the special drawings we used to write [to Santa Klaus], only one [child] mentioned *letters*. Apparently, it would be expected they referred to letters, but that did not happen. It seems that they are still not aware of letters. Some mentioned 'pictures' and one referred to 'names'. (portfolio excerpt, my translation)

As far as I can see, these excerpts show how much information that was shared and discussed in the sessions has been incorporated into Maria's professional discourse. In the fourth and final part of her portfolio Maria herself helps her reader, and, most importantly, helps herself to make her professional growth perfectly visible.

Maria explicitly recovers each of the preliminary reflections she had written previously for each learning module, which she introduces with the following:

(In this part,) I compare the 'preliminary reflections' to the activities that I implemented in the children's room after having learned each of the modules with the aim of checking whether there is any significant difference (...). By doing so, I can assess what I might have learned. (portfolio excerpt, my translation)

This is actually the part of her portfolio where we clearly hear her own voice. The beginning of Maria's reflection about her learning in module 1 resonates with some of the ideas about cultural learning that she herself had learned in the program. When Maria compares her practices (before and after undergoing this professional learning), she lets us perceive how she has *clarified many ideas* to herself about how children develop their language and her own role in the educational process:

As usual, one starts learning with more or less vague ideas about the issue to be learned. From the beginning, I had understood that, in order to develop language, it is necessary to interact with children. They learn to talk with adults and with pairs. Therefore, the main objective of the task upon which the preliminary reflection was made was that all children talked and participated in the interpretation of the illustrations of a book. The activities that were reported on pages 6 to 12 [of my portfolio] do show up a new, much more specific knowledge base. During the talk [with children], I did not correct the children when they made mistakes. I let them speak, I explored their speaking further and I offered them back the correct models in the most relevant moments. During the [join construction of the] narrative, I was especially attentive to its organization: temporal, spatial and causal. I intervened to guide it, stimulating children in the creation of an organized narrative. I have also learned this attitude. (portfolio excerpt, my translation)

Her reflection about her learning and learning process in module 2 is especially self-revealing. She admits to have falsified the preliminary tasks by skimming independently some of the texts that were provided to her, but she also admits that such non-mediated study lead her to construct an incorrect understanding of some of the fundamental ideas about how to help very young children initiate the development of language awareness capacities. Her final voice then reveals a complex process of self-inspection, which was facilitated by the action she implemented after the theoretical sessions, as reported above:

The tasks that served the initial reflection were already inspired by the initial ideas conveyed at the beginning of module 2 and in a book (...) indicated in the bibliography. These activities were therefore conceived from knowledge that was partially constructed during the program. The activities are suggested in chapter 3.1 of the book (...). Few children took part in them (eight in eighteen) (...). Two of the tasks – identifying phonemes and omitting syllables – revealed themselves to be very difficult for the children.

Apparently, the task that was carried out after the module was less ambitious. All the children took part in this task. I worked on the assumption that the task of rhyme identification was within their realm of possibilities. This task was carried out with a better knowledge of the main aim: to stir and promote language awareness (...). The most important [thing to do] is to focus their attention on issues about language. This awareness is not natural or spontaneous: it must be learned. Spontaneously, we don't pay attention to words or to the sounds that make them up. I could learn that, in order to promote this movement in children, the teacher must be familiar with theoretical knowledge about linguistics: phoneme, grapheme, relationship between phoneme and grapheme, syllabic structure, etc. I acquired this knowledge during the program. The tasks that I now plan to promote language awareness in children do have a foundation that they didn't have before. This is the main difference between the tasks that were carried out at the beginning of the module (which served the preliminary reflection) and those that were carried out after concluding it. (portfolio excerpts, my translation)

Again, when she estimates the learning she accomplished in module 3, Maria is fairly clear about what she has achieved. One perceives how she learned the meaning and relevance of the concept of emergent literacy for her professional practice due to the in-service program:

In the initial task, children, with [my] help, read the pictures of a text. Eventually, that may help them to start learning about reading. That also allows them to interiorize some procedures (...). However, the substantial difference between the former and the latter task lies in the idea that led them. Initially I understood 'literacy' as knowing how to read and write. I had not learned the concept of 'emergent literacy'. Learning to read and write is a second, more advanced phase of literacy. In the pre-school, literacy – emergent literacy – is the set of ideas about reading and writing upon which the [formal] learning of reading and writing are [afterwards] developed. Literacy does not begin by learning how to read and write but by a set of ideas about reading and writing. The distinction between literacy and emergent literacy, as well as the importance of the latter, were learnings\* in this module. (portfolio excerpt, my translation; \*I have decided to use the plural *learnings* to keep my translation close to the original in Portuguese, *aprendizagens*)

This portfolio has made me seriously think about pre-school teachers' professional needs. It clearly evidences one teacher's conscious (re)construction of her professional knowledge about language education, and the role of her previous experience, of academic knowledge as well as of writing in sustaining her reflective process. Maria's professional learning was clearly not a simple matter of applying theory to practice, but resulted from a dialectical relationship between both. Another crucial point that this case has helped me notice about her professional learning concerns the teacher's own disposition to learn. She shows a sense of how theory might illuminate her practice, even though she is already a very experienced teacher. She seems to accept that 'experience' does not equate with 'knowledge' but that it is a condition for developing the kind of professional knowledge this program was designed to facilitate.

#### *4.3 A closer look into the learning achieved: unveiling complexity in the learning process*

I would now like to return to the analysis of the results of the survey because they also opened up a way to try and further understand the learning that participants affirmed to have constructed. This analysis has revealed interesting data leading me to some interpretations that I find most relevant for the understanding of pre-school teachers about language education. In particular, quantitative data analysis showed that learning in general varied according to the nature of contents and according to personal factors, mostly to participants' academic degree.

The analysis showed that teachers affirmed to have learned more about natural dimensions (most part of module 1) than about cultural dimensions ((part of) module 1, modules 2 & 3) of language education in the pre-school years. Another way put, though learning also occurred, teachers affirmed to have learned less about

specialised oral language education, language awareness and emergent literacy than about basic oral language development. The consideration of teachers' academic degree provided me with some hints as for how to possibly understand these different learning patterns.

No significant statistical differences were found in the mean values referring to teachers' learning about the natural dimension when their academic degree was taken into account, but significant differences were found in the mean values referring to their learning about the cultural dimension when correlated to their academic degree. The mean value of the answers about their learning about specialized oral language action ( $F(3,336)=3.699, p < 0.05$ ), about language awareness ( $F(3,336)=4.490, p < 0.05$ ) and about emergent literacy ( $F(3,336)=3.579, p < 0.05$ ) was always significantly superior in the group of teachers with higher academic degrees, mostly masters' degrees, to that of the group with a 3-year certification diploma or a 4-year degree. In other words, whereas teachers affirmed to have learned about the natural dimensions of language education in very high degrees irrespective of their academic degree, the same was not found for the cultural dimension: Though learning about cultural dimensions also occurred, teachers apparently learned more about this when their academic degree was a master degree.

##### 5. LEARNING ABOUT TEACHERS' LEARNING: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

I believe some learning can be achieved from the analysis of the results presented above and I also believe that such learning is of major interest for theorizing about the most adequate rationale for designing future professional development programs about language education for pre-school teachers. I consider this to be a relevant challenge when the context of pre-school conceptual changes in Portugal and consequent professional needs, referred to at the beginning of this essay, is taken into consideration.

The first relevant point I would like to bring out is the fact that the majority of the participants were experienced teachers. The presence of experienced teachers in in-service initiatives is recommended, for instance, in the 2006 OCDE report because of the professional knowledge they have acquired and are thus able to share. Yet, in this case in particular, I believe the importance of the participation of so many experienced teachers does not lay in what they could teach each other as much as in what that revealed about what they still had to learn. I think I can assume all the teachers to have constructed knowledge of some kind or another, taking into consideration the consistency of the analysis of the survey. The fact that these professionals graduated a long time before the most recent pre-school reforms were initiated and related academic knowledge was formally introduced into graduation processes is therefore very relevant. To my mind, the consistency in the results about their knowledge construction corroborates the idea that they are facing major conceptual needs and that specific professional learning in the area of



language education is in fact required, suggesting as well that this may be particularly the case for elder teachers and teachers in the public pre-school system (as was the case for all participants). As far as I can see, the results of the analysis also suggest possible ways to follow in order to conceive of adjusted professional learning initiatives for them, the most important concerning the role of theory in professional learning and the need to better assess teachers' conceptual needs.

I think the results of the analysis evidenced the role of the systematic study of an academic or theoretical nature in promoting teachers professional learning (Shulman, 1987; Day, 1999), therefore highlighting the need to take theory seriously when designing learning situations. In my view, the results presented above clearly show that experience without theory is not sufficient to provide teachers learning, at least when there are wide conceptual changes that teachers need to grapple with in order to transform and adjust their practices.

My results further show that the specific theoretical view on language education in pre-school years that was imparted in the program, which explicitly guided teachers in recognizing the complexity of language learning in the pre-school years, helping them identify relevant content knowledge as well as specific pedagogic knowledge, was apparently relevant in helping teachers construct new knowledge. This view therefore stands up as a potential point of departure when preparing future professional learning contexts for pre-school teachers. However, I could also conclude that such view might yet be a limited one because of not explicitly framing the specific discussion about language education within the current general view of pre-school pedagogy. That is to say, I believe that a well-balanced program for pre-school teachers' learning should also include the explicit discussion of current general pedagogic knowledge about pre-school education (Shulman, 1987).

I came to this conclusion when I realised the importance of higher academic degrees in the learning of pre-school teachers about the cultural dimensions of pre-school education. This is indeed a complex issue, showing the complexity involved in the professional learning of these teachers, thus deserving my close consideration.

My data have shown that the pre-school teachers who had higher academic degrees, mostly masters degrees, consistently said to have learned more about the relevance of initiating children in specialised conversations in the pre-school context, in language awareness abilities and in emergent literacy practices. That is, the pre-school teachers who had more advanced academic degrees were also those who better understood the relevance of developing such practices. These are in deep contrast to those traditionally developed in the pre-school contexts, which were restricted to helping children develop physically and emotionally and not intended to initiate children in cultural language learning, which was assumed to be the realm of primary school alone.

The results that I have come across could possibly be interpreted as indicating that teachers' conceptual needs were weaker in this dimension, that is, that they learned less because they knew more. Although that seems to be unsustainable in

the light of previous research (cf. Lopes & Fernandes, 2009), it is possible to assume that teachers may be already familiar with some of the ideas that were discussed. It is in fact unlikely that teachers have not thought or read about introducing writing in the pre-school, as this has actually been the major explicit change brought by the guidelines in the area of language education. However, in the in-service program, the cultural dimension of language education meant more than introducing print into the classroom and the view imparted was deeply related to the general pedagogic paradigm that currently sustains the conception of pre-school education.

The introduction of this paradigm has meant a considerable curricular change. As discussed in the initial part of this paper, these new pedagogical orientations are in line with socio-constructivist aims and principles that have been identified as most adequate for pre-school children and the way they learn (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002; OECD, 2001, 2006). In particular, the development of a lifelong disposition to learn through a holistic approach to early development and education was assumed, centred on children, recognizing them as agents of their own learning and respecting their natural learning strategies: play, active learning, expression through language and other media, learning from relationships with significant others and informal research in matters of interest or concern to them. Initiating pre-school children in cultural dimensions of language practices and abilities clearly fits these general aims. The current understanding of pre-school education clearly invites taking social cultural practices of our current lives (including literacy practices) into the pre-school room so that they can be fully experienced by children; in fact, they are, to my mind, a very important dimension of the desired 'lifelong disposition to learn'. This aim is however hard to attain when traditional conceptions and practices prevail (Afonso, 2006; Vasconcelos, 2006), suggesting the need for teachers' professional learning.

The most immediate interpretation I can make of my results is therefore that the more teachers know about pre-school education *in general*, the more they seem to be able understand and learn about the relevance of cultural dimensions of language education in the pre-school years *in particular*. I find it reasonable to assume that the most recently graduated teachers had cognitive dispositions (Day, 1999) that scaffolded them to more fully acknowledge the relevance of what the in-service program had to offer them about the cultural dimensions of language education and, therefore, to consistently construct more knowledge about this than their colleagues who have not gone through those post-graduate learning processes and have not been so fully acquainted with the implications of socio-constructivist ideas in pre-school education.

I am not suggesting that all pre-school teachers should go through master degrees; I am suggesting that specific programs, as was our case and future ones, would better help teachers explicitly situate the specific learning about language education within the general framework they might still not be fully acquainted with. This conjecture obviously needs further inquiry and support, but I believe it points into a crucial aspect in the understanding of pre-school teachers' profes-

sional learning, one that seems to me to be the origin of (most of) the complexity of pre-school education. And I also believe that Maria's case is a relevant one to consider here too. As I see it, despite her modest qualifications, Maria revealed a kind of cognitive disposition to learn through theory that maybe equated to the attitude of those who have taken master courses. The key to me seems to be openness to theory, and future programs should care to promote this attitude.

Another crucial conclusion that clearly came out from the analysis of the results is the need to carefully reconsider the nature of pre-school teachers' conceptual needs. Teachers revealed a lack of knowledge about the natural dimensions of language education in the pre-school years, as this was actually the dimension they said to have learnt more. I was not surprised by these results because this dimension has been dealt with in a too restricted way either in curricular settings or in relevant research.

In the official guidelines, teachers are led to think that 'oral language development' is limited to the 'addition' of discrete sets of developments (vocabulary, morphology and syntax), without any incursion into the complexity of its nature, fundamentals and pedagogical principles:

The acquisition of a better oral language is a fundamental domain in pre-school education, being the teachers' role to create the conditions so that children learn;

It is in the communicative context that is created by the teacher that the child will dominate language, enlarging her vocabulary, making more correct and complex sentences, acquiring a better domain of expression and communication that allow them more elaborate forms of representation. The everyday life of the pre-school room will allow, for instance, that children adequately use simple sentences of different kinds: affirmative, negative, interrogative, exclamation, as well as gender, number, tense, person and place agreement. (Departamento de Educação Básica, 1997:69, my translation)

My conviction is that similar restricted conceptions of the meaning of 'oral language development' may be leading researchers (and, therefore, teacher trainers) into a limited perception of teachers' professional needs. In Lopes & Fernandes (2009), the natural dimension of oral language education is presented as being the dimension that teachers work the most with their children, and this was uncritically assumed by the researchers after their research, no further inquiry being done.

I believe my results have clearly revealed that pre-school teachers' needs should undergo a more serious assessment which I find might be very relevant to better conceive of future learning situations concerning language education.

## 6. SOME CONCLUSIONS

When introducing the issue of this essay, I referred to the OECD country note on Portugal which stressed the need for professional in-service training to help "practitioners (...) to become more reflective (...) and to take more responsibility for their professional development" (OECD, 2000:32) in order to facilitate the imple-

mentation of the innovative guidelines and thus raise the quality in pre-school education. The research presented in this paper, centred on an instance of an in-service training, was carried out to study how to conceive of teachers' learning about language education.

The main conclusions I reached reinforce the need to promote professional learning about language education for pre-school teachers and they point to the conclusion that an enlarged understanding of theory, one that helps teachers perceive the complexity of language education in particular and helps them frame such learning in a sophisticated understanding about pre-school pedagogy in general, might be important in fostering professional learning. The excerpts of Maria's portfolio illustrate that she was able to 'become more reflective and to take more responsibility' for her professional development through the in-service program. Besides, the conclusions also highlight specific undetected learning needs and revealed (at least some aspects of) the complexity of the process.

This essay focuses on some of many aspects that can be inquired into when researching pre-school teachers' professional learning as experienced in the context of in-service programs. I deliberately focused my attention on what can be rightly described as 'only a part of the whole picture'. By focusing on some aspects, I gave way to my conviction about the inescapability of the need to learn theoretically about language education so that professional learning can occur. And by exploring the issues I have focused on, I also gave way to my intuition about the role of general pedagogical knowledge in this learning.

Nevertheless, I am aware that other aspects need to be researched so that I can get a clear, comprehensive understanding of the learning pre-school teachers are able to construct in in-service contexts. One of the major issues that must be inquired concerns the action research model that we have followed. I have found some evidence that it offered potentialities as well as limitations for teachers' learning. An interesting hint about this has been the information that the collaborative dynamics between pre-school teachers and their peers from primary schools in their situated workplaces went on after the in-service program was finished. This fact raises the question about the effectiveness of the collegial form of learning and of the role of constructing communities of practice in future learning situations. Another major issue of inquiry is beyond any question teachers' ability to use writing as an instrument of professional growth. Maria's capacity to write her way into learning deserves our attention. Her act of writing underlines her autonomy as a learner, the fact that she was actively applying ideas and reflecting on what she learned in situations of practice. However, my data shows that Maria's portfolio is but an exception in the pattern of reflexive writing ability among pre-school teachers, as most portfolios are not written in such a proficient manner. Could it be that teachers would benefit from an explicit initiation in such forms of specialised professional learning? Is this another realm of professional knowledge that teachers depend on to construct their professional learning?

I find these dimensions to be of absolute priority in future inquiry since it is officially taken for granted (at least the Portuguese accreditation agency takes it for granted) that teachers are capable of *learning through written language in contexts of focused action-research*, such as the process these teachers went through, and perhaps further enquiring into my data can bring any elaborations on those assumptions too.

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