

LITERACY BELIEFS AND PRACTICES: DIAGNOSES AND INTERVENTIONS THAT IMPROVE MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION

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This special issue on Portuguese research offers a unique look at the problems, questions, and solutions addressed by mother tongue researchers/educators in a particular country – Portugal. Nonetheless, we risk saying that many, if not all, of the topics discussed herein are of interest to other researchers, in other countries, who are committed to improving mother tongue education. Global societies face common challenges and goals. Migratory experiences bring children, who do not speak our mother tongues, to our schools. World-wide, a small percentage of children present a specific difficulty learning to read because they are dyslexic. Teacher training programs around the world seek to provide the best, state-of-the-art education to future teachers as to ensure quality instruction for all children. Intervention programs aim to prevent academic failure and to keep children in school because we know that skilful, informed students are better prepared to become active citizens. Common frameworks, such as the ones adopted in PIRLS and PISA, to measure reading literacy are now accepted as one way to assess reading attainment levels and to inform mother tongue curriculum development.

1

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However, although we share interests, challenges, and goals, each country has its own educational system where specific educational policies, beliefs and practices shape what goes on in schools and classrooms. Portugal is no exception in this respect and its educational system may be very different from that of most developed countries. At present, compulsory education goes only until grade nine (age 15) and Portugal has one of the highest drop-out rates of all OECD countries. Preschool education is in expansion, but it does not cover all eligible children because of lack of infrastructures. Clearly, there is still much to be done, but compared to 30 years ago, when most of the population held a fourth grade education, we came a long way. Now, approximately 30% of the school population enrolls in higher education.

The Portuguese educational system is organized in cycles. The first cycle corresponds to the first 4 years of formal schooling (ages 6-10), the second one to the fifth and sixth grades (ages 10-12), and the third to grades seven to nine (ages 12-15). *Basic Education* encompasses these three cycles and is followed by *Secondary Education*, which correspond to three years of college preparatory course work or to professional training. Preschool education is not compulsory, but close to 70% of five-year-old children are now attending this foundational educational level.

In this issue, we start by presenting research at the preschool level and continue by presenting studies following the Portuguese school system sequential progression: 1st cycle, 1st and 2nd cycles, 3rd cycle, and higher education. This inclusive sequence attests to the diverse nature of research in mother tongue education currently conducted in Portugal. The fact that this research is carried out in different institutions, polytechnic institutes and universities, both public and private, in different parts of the country, also attests to a widespread commitment to the development of a research agenda in many institutions. This commitment has grown in recent years partly as a result of increasing funding opportunities. Indeed, the governmental *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia* [Science and Technology Foundation] provides much of the funding for Ph.D studies and research projects. Other private institutions, such as the *Gulbenkian* foundation, have been instrumental in offering an outlet for publications resulting from research projects and Ph.D theses. As a

result of improved conditions for the establishment of research agendas in mother tongue education, we have seen an increase in the number of publications in this area.

Concomitantly to the improvement in research conditions, we have seen a progressive shift from a francophone influence to an anglophone one in terms of the theoretical and empirical frameworks informing mother tongue research and educational practices. As the articles attest, most of the research here presented reflects this shift, although there is still a clear francophone influence. Importantly, the articles also attest to the more recent international research interest in writing. Clearly, mother tongue education encompasses reading and writing and oral discourse, but traditionally reading has received more attention than writing.

In preschool, reading and writing have been the focus of numerous investigations in recent years. However, Lopes and Fernandes describe the emergent reading and writing beliefs of preschool educators and conclude that these do not reflect state-of-the-art knowledge about how to support young children's understanding of the written code. A more traditional approach, based on teaching oral language skills and developing social awareness seems to dominate preschool education. Araújo, Folgado and Pocinho show how reading instruction is conceptualized in fourth grade textbooks and discuss how reading comprehension focuses on low level questions that are not conducive to students' development of inferential skills and to the adoption of a critical stance toward reading. In light of these findings, implications for curriculum design and reading assessments are discussed.

The articles by Horta and Alves Martins and Cardoso, Pereira, Silva and Sousa maintain the focus on the 1st cycle of *Basic Education*, but look at writing instead. The first, lays out a path of orthographic development across grade levels. Importantly, the results may be helpful to teachers as they try to understand what constitute more or less advanced levels of orthographic knowledge. Likewise, the second article may be helpful to teachers as it presents a writing intervention program that positively impacts the quality of students writing when adequate, explicit genre instruction is provided. Pereira, Cardoso and Graça's article offers a conceptualization of writing theory and practice that encompasses teachers and students

relationships with writing and their actions in working with different text genres at different grade levels.

Carvalhais and Silva bring us back to reading research with a particular subset of the school population; dyslexic children attending the 1st and 2nd cycles of *Basic Education*. Their investigation shows the different performances of normal readers versus dyslexic readers and their results suggest that this work can assist professionals in the diagnosis of developmental dyslexia. This constitutes a crucial first step for proper interventions to be put in place so that dyslexic children can succeed in school. Pocinho's article, aimed at improving the reading achievement of teenage poor readers, and can also serve as a reference for future interventions that lead to academic success.

Figueiredo and Silva's article on Portuguese as a L2 language mirrors the current diversity in our school system and in society at large due to immigration. It raises interesting questions regarding the "critical period" hypothesis. Finally, Pinho, Pereira, Moreira and Loureiro present the results of a "blended-learning" situation in which college students engaged in diverse on-line and off-line types of writing interactions. This topic is indicative of the possibilities technology offers nowadays as far as the creation of novel teaching and learning environments.

In sum, the articles address different issues spanning the whole educational system and offer a comprehensive view of the type of mother tongue research currently conducted in Portugal. We hope they are of interest to L1 readers and that they can serve to stimulate further reflection, criticism, and future research questions.