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Intervention Research in a Public Elementary School: A Critical-Collaborative Teacher Education Project on Reading and Writing

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Abstract

This Teacher Education Project is an intervention research aimed at creating new school roles for educating students as readers and writers as well as citizens. The methodological framework was based on Vygotsky's discussions of method as praxis (Vygotsky, 1921-23/1997, 1930/1999, 1931/1997, 1926-30/1996), as well as on both the Marxist practical-materialistic-revolutionary activity and Engeström's (2008, 2009) extensions of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). The work at school was motivated by students' limited awareness of reading and writing. The goal was to involve the school as a community in understanding and transforming the ways in which reading and writing were addressed in classrooms. The methodology used for organizing and carrying out the project was devised so as to allow for three activity systems that partially interact with their objects – that is, reading and writing as tools for teaching-learning in different areas in order to constitute students as citizens. However, for this paper, we will focus solely on the Teacher Education Activity System, which we termed Teacher Support Team. Three episodes are discussed in this paper: Two video sessions with the Teacher Support Team, the first of which took place in 2010, and the second in 2011; and a classroom reading class session that was videotaped in 2011 as part of the Teacher Support Team work. The theoretical and practical work developed was targeted at creating a mutual Zone of Proximal Development that supported teachers, coordinators, and the principal, through the appropriation of reading and writing as processes. The results show that the organization of the project as interrelated activity systems enhanced the entire school's prospects of appropriating the reading and writing teaching-learning processes, by focusing on the same object, in the diverse systems that framed the project.

Introduction

This paper discusses the methodological organization of an intervention project – Reading and Writing in Different Areas – conducted during two years (2010 and 2011) in a public elementary school located in São Paulo, Brazil’s largest city, attended by students from low-income households. The school had been poorly evaluated by a São Paulo State indicator of public schools teaching-learning quality, based on students’ mastery of reading and writing.

The project is inserted in a Critical Research Paradigm (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982). It focuses on how to organize an intervention project in a school context, involving the school as a whole. It mainly aimed at understanding and critically discussing literacy practices and the interest they serve, regarding students’ constitution as readers and writers. According to Magalhães and Fidalgo (2007), in an intervention research developed within a Critical Paradigm, the primary role of applied linguists, as researchers and teacher educators, is *“to involve tackling language-bound issues as means for organizing type of thought here defined in critical reflective term, i.e., as a type of thought that might allow individuals – actual agents of their own thought – to probe into their routine practices”* (p. 329).

In other words, a critical intervention aims to build collective contexts for collaborative knowledge production involving all participants in theoretical-practical negotiations that might encourage comprehension, as well as questioning both the meanings conveyed by actions, and the interests that based them. Furthermore, it involves the education of professionals who are conscious of their actions in the constitution of themselves and others with whom they interact. The focus is on jointly questioning themselves and their didactic practices about needs, problems, values, teaching-learning concepts, common objectives, as well as on students’ learning and development. It presupposes the deconstruction of discourses and reasoning that were historically constructed throughout their experiences with schooling and teaching (Magalhães, 2004; Pérez Gomes, 2001; Newman & Holzman; 1999, Smyth, 1992). Thus, deconstructing them means thinking of methodological choices that organize the educational contexts and the interests they serve, so as to allow for new reasoning and acting, leading to social, political and educational transformations, as pointed out by Vygotsky (1921-23, pp. 463-464). However, school contexts are not usually organized in such a dialectical relational structure.

Engeström’s (2008, 2009) discussions on how to conduct intervention projects in complex contexts supported the project’s methodological organization as activity systems, structured as a chain. Based on those discussions, we intended to involve the school as a community that jointly discusses values, ideas, needs and problems, and makes collaborative decisions. This organization allows for the production of a formative context in which the initial object that had triggered the research design process could go through a collective and collaborative movement of negotiation. This collaborative process aimed for a joint reorganization of the initial senses and meanings that were historically built by the school’s literacy teaching and learning, as well as the establishment of rules and work division that underlie them. In Engeström and Sannino’s (2010, p.6) words, the object *“refers to the ‘raw material’ or ‘problem space’ at which the activity is directed”* initially. Through dialogic and dialectic relations made possible by argumentative language organization, the object is expanded into new outcomes, by means of a critical collaborative process.

Vygotsky's conception of method (methodology), supported on the Marxist practical materialistic revolutionary activity, bases the emphasis on Collaboration and Contradiction as central to the intentional processes of teaching-learning and development. Bearing this in mind, this paper was organized to focus on: (a) Vygotsky's discussion of methodology; (b) an intervention project organized as a chain of activity systems; and (c) episodes of the project to reveal if and how the organization created a possibility for shared constructions of literacy meanings.

How do we 'become ourselves' while/through interacting with others?

As I pointed out, the intervention research was designed to reach the entire school (teachers, students, principal and coordinators)¹, so as to form a team of professionals who jointly and critically reflect on their daily practices in order to understand, analyze and reorganize their theoretical-practical and political bases. Forming professionals able to understand their actions and their students' learning and development is the objective of the researchers involved in the Extra-Mural Program *Acting as Citizen*, where this project is inserted. The *Acting as Citizen* Program aims at the "development of citizenship as a condition of those who do not simply accept what is provided to them, but who also want to produce their own rights and duties interdependently" (Lessa, Liberali & Fidalgo, 2005).

However, this is a complex task since the school, despite the advances reached in terms of theoretical discussions, is usually organized as an individual culture, based on content transmission and knowledge return as the means by which teaching-learning occurs (Ninin, 2011; Aranha, 2009; Magalhães, 2010, 2011; Engeström, 2008; Smyth, 1992; Schön, 1992; Perez Gomez, 1992; among others). In this frame, the teacher is, as pointed out by Vygotsky (1921-23/1997, p. 339), "an auxiliary aid and tool of education" and the aim of teaching is to "inculcate the ability to acquire such knowledge and to make use of it".

For Vygotsky, the teacher always needs to be politically involved. In his words:

Pedagogics is never and was never politically indifferent, since, willingly or unwillingly, through its own work on the psyche (social reflexes), it has always adopted a particular social pattern, i.e., political line, in accordance with the dominant social class that has guided its interests (Vygotsky, 1921-23/1997, p. 348).

¹ The intervention project, in organization order to involve the whole school, was also based on previous experiences of the Research Group on the need to implicate the management team in the project, or it would never be successfully conducted in schools. This happens due to the fact that coordinators and principals are the ones to organize the school work and how time-space is used, including the work developed during the time dedicated to the collective pedagogical work. Teachers in Brazilian public schools usually have a collective training time twice a week.

As proposed by Vygotsky (1921-23/1997), the pedagogical process is active in the social life. Life is revealed as a system forging permanent tension and conquests, constantly creating and combining new actions, as a critical movement. Therefore, each idea, each movement and each experience is an inspiration for creating a new reality, in the sense of being something new, something creative. Pedagogical processes and the teacher's work, in this frame, as in a real social world, involve a critical self-reflective process of continuous comprehension and reorganization of intentional choices. These are related to one's own senses about teaching-learning in a particular context, students' and teachers' roles and schools' values, aiming at a scientific educational content and social-cultural-historical and political comprehension of students' citizenship constitution.

Methodology is the central concept that supports this discussion, and it is based on the views presented by Vygotsky (1921-23/1997, 1930/1999, 1931/1997, 1926-30/1996), highlighting a close relationship between the object in construction, the content and the theoretical-methodological basis of investigation. Vygotsky was, then, seeking a methodology that could allow him to scientifically study human beings in the specific socio-historical contexts where their experiences took place. He was interested in the socio-historical and cultural relations in which we "*become ourselves by means of our relations with others*" (1997/1930, p. 64). For him, the methodological choices could not be understood as an application of specific techniques or as pre-existing methods that had been thought of in order to achieve a certain objective. The search for a non-Cartesian, non-dualist, non a-historical methodology is based on the Marxist dialectical historical materialism. The theoretical-philosophical concepts of Collaboration and Contradiction are central to the mutual and intentional production of transformed reasoning, concepts and actions, in this frame.

This leads us to focus on the participants' intentional action so as to allow for the sharing of meanings (negotiation), but also to purposely establish controversies among "actual" individuals, their actions and material life conditions. The emphasis is on the inseparability of theory (knowledge) and practice (action), both understood within the context of their historicity. In this frame, the concept of alienation is important for the comprehension and reorganization of participants' understanding of their professional activity as suffering (passivity), or as a place of learning and development. Understanding professional work as suffering leads to impotence in the creation of the new, since their personal and professional lives are understood "*as an activity against themselves, regardless of themselves and not-belonging to them*" (Marx, 2007/1944, HTML).

Marx's discussions offer a philosophical basis for the concepts of Collaboration and Contradiction, core notions for collaborative and critical meanings sharing, as discussed in this paper. This is centrally connected to Vygotsky's concept of zone of proximal development, as creating activities in which, by means of intentional actions, people negotiate to comprehend and transform realities (Newman & Holzman, 1999, p. 100). The focus is on allowing learning to take place - not only learning of specific content, but of new ways of thinking and intentionally act. It is about creating contexts where cognitive and affective conflicts are not separated, and enable the participants to listen to and be responsive and responsible to the actions of others, as well as to their own actions.

In this context, collaborating means creating trusting and respectful relations, in which each participant intentionally acts to mutually and inter-dependently listen to the other and ask problematic questions in order to: comprehend the other's senses, share reasoning, be

willing to expand others' and their own understandings, raise doubts, pose challenges and make suggestions, ask for clarification, disagree, review or complement ideas previously explained, describe experiences as a means to relate to others. In short, the emphasis is on producing shared meanings, which might not have been possible without peers' participation and support. As discussed by Edwards (2007), it involves the relational agency, i.e., the capacity to offer and ask for support from others.

In other words, this process involves both an argumentative organization of language and collaborative actions. Collaborative relations are responsible for the negotiation with the other, which presupposes participants' intentional involvement and the development of mutual trust (Magalhães, 2003/2007; Magalhães & Fidalgo, 2007; Ninin, 2006). However, it does not allow for learning and development without the argumentative organization of language. Argumentation is responsible for the creation of collaborative relationships and both are responsible for transformation. Argumentation by itself would seem like an authoritarian imposition, if used without collaboration, which would impede negotiation.

A key methodological choice is how the research is organized to create mutual zones of proximal development for participants, thus allowing for learning and development and, therefore, enhancing transformations into the school internal and external communities (e.g., researchers', the school community). In addition, central to this frame, are the means by which the interactive relations are organized – which often are responsible for the success or failure in the project conduction. This is so since the project gathered participants who, despite concentrating on the solution of a common problem, attribute different senses and meanings to a socio-historical and culturally produced scientific knowledge about literacy teaching-learning, language organization and teachers' and students' roles in classroom. This context of diverse socio-cultural and historical experiences will necessarily create affective-cognitive conflicts and tensions that will inevitably set an emotionally intense zone, since participants need to take intellectual and emotional risks for a joint development of negotiated meanings (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 198). Therefore, involving all the participants in the shared negotiation can lead the school to overcome limitations, individualism and alienation (Marx, 1844-45/2007) that organize most schools and life contexts.

The comprehension of collaboration and contradiction as central movements to methodological choices, as well as their theoretical-philosophical bases are important to this frame, as we will see below. In this paper, the collaborative process will be analyzed aiming at understanding how participants' relations are organized to intentionally make requests for clarification, explanations, understanding, and exemplification. However, it will also be examined with a focus on critically understanding the relationship between the disagreement, questioning or acceptance, to the understanding of the reading and writing process and the means by which reading and/or writing are addressed in the classroom. In short, how the speeches may allow for learning and development.

Reading and writing: Intervention Research organized as Activity Systems

The intervention research is discussed by Engeström (2009, p. 321) as an educational intervention as opposed to a linear intervention, which focuses on reproduction and transmission of knowledge that is considered valid by the researcher. It is organized, from the beginning, to enable researchers and local practitioners to create zones of proximal

development by means of reciprocal actions that are intentionally, as well as dialectically and dialogically organized. The aim is to allow participants to jointly discuss actions, ideas, students' learning and development, and the theoretical concepts and interests that base them. As stated by Engeström, when entering the field, researchers have, ideally speaking, constructed the object of the activity system, the target to be reached. However, the content to be worked will depend on the participants' particular needs, and it is negotiated between all involved.

Discussions of Cultural Historical Activity Theory and works carried out by researchers such as Engeström (2008, 2009), Liberali (2009, 2010, 2011), Magalhães (2010, 2011) among others, have allowed for the organization of this Project as interrelated activity systems organized as a chain, in which each system partially shares the object (senses and meanings) with others, as well as tools, rules and labor division. The purpose was to develop a possibility to produce a creative chain (Liberali, 2006, 2009, 2011), that is, the possibility for the same concept to be critically and collaboratively focused on, in different activity systems, or in diverse activities inside the same system. This organization would enable the same concept, idea, value, and language organization to be focused on theoretically and practically in expanded ways, since the object previously produced will base the next movement of knowledge construction. This would also increase the possibility for learning and development and school contexts reorganization. Besides, it would reveal if and how the shared meanings across systems and in the same system were learned, i.e., if they are being creatively or reiteratively appropriated and worked on.

The Project was carried out in a Full Time State Elementary School² that receives from 1st grade (6 years of age) to 5th grade students (10 years of age), from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. This full time school is organized by a General Curriculum (in the morning) and Curricular Workshops (in the afternoon). Although it is located in a middle class neighborhood, the school receives children from neighboring districts – who belong to the lower middle class. Other full time public schools have a different organization, with classes, workshops and labs equally divided along the day. However, most public elementary schools in Brazil still have classes either in morning or afternoon, not full time like the one participating in this project.

The Research Group was contacted by the school's principal and coordinator to develop a project on reading and writing, due to their students' poor literacy performance. We emphasized that our objective would be to carry out a critical-collaborative project that would involve a support group for the entire school to work during teacher and coordinator collective work. The project would, thus, involve researchers, teachers, principal, deputy principal and coordinators. With the school agreement, the project was organized in interacting activity systems so as to focus on managers' education; teachers' formation; researchers and school participants' discussion; and on classroom literacy assignments.

² It is also important to say that in Brazilian State schools teachers are underpaid and usually come from poor private universities.

The network of activity systems was thought of so that all the systems could partially share the object of reading and writing, albeit in different ways. The network was organized by:

- **Teacher Support Team:** Researchers, teachers and the managing team meet every fifteen days, during three hours, to plan, present and discuss reading practices and the theories that based them. This was the central system, because it gathered all the participants and practices, so that the underlying concepts that were discussed by participants (researchers, teachers, coordinators, deputy principal and principal) might be focused again in the other systems. When these concepts returned in the teacher support team, it became possible to comprehend how they were appropriated – creatively or reproductively.

- **Teacher Continuing Education:** It is a context created in Brazilian public schools in which teachers and a pedagogical coordinator develop a collective work for the implementation of the pedagogical work. The goal is to strengthen the school's pedagogical project; to (re)plan and evaluate classroom activities, based on the school's teaching-learning educational project. It lasts for three hours a week. During this time, the Teacher Support Team meeting took place every fifteen days.

- **School Management Team:** Two researchers of the group meet every fifteen days with the management team in order to discuss their work as teachers' educators in school. This was important since the coordinators were supposed to evaluate teachers' reading and writing classroom work and coordinate the Teacher Continuing Education Meetings.

Figure 1, below, describes the relationships between the three activity systems that organized this project. The focus is on revealing the centrality of the Teacher Support Team, since it is the only system in which all participants meet to discuss classrooms reading and writing practices, their relationships to students' learning and development, as well as how to rethink classroom literacy teaching-learning based on new theoretical-practical issues. It provided us the possibility to comprehend, how a concept appropriated in this system could support participants' new actions in other activity systems.

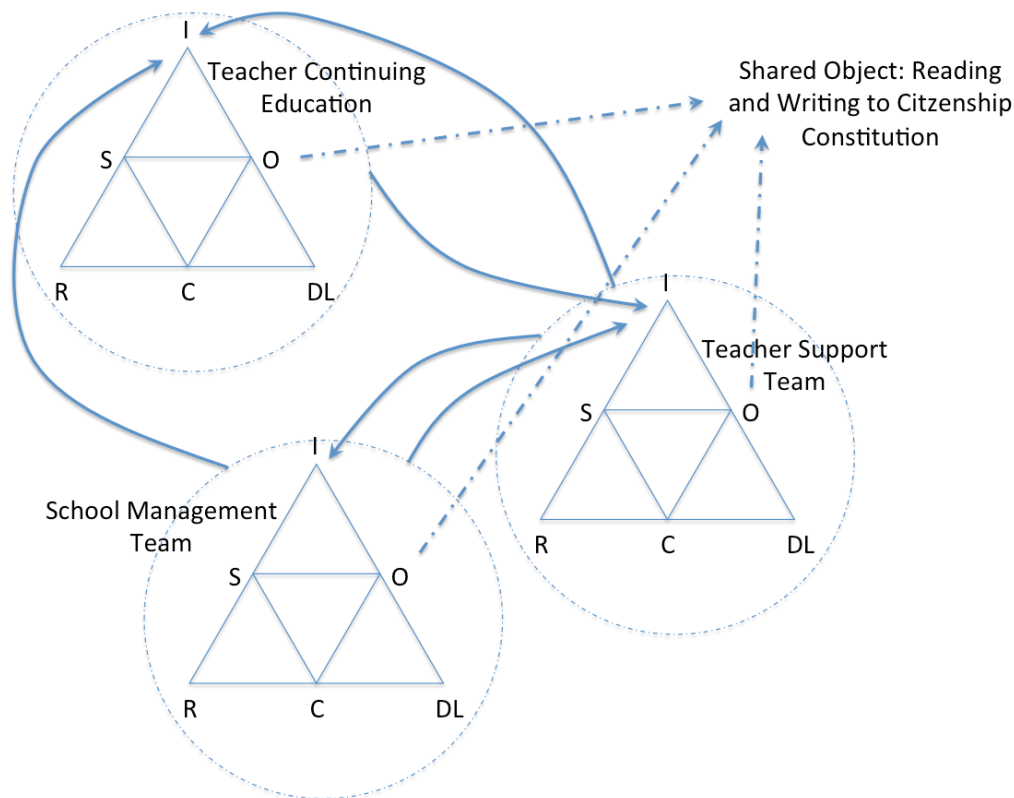


Figure 1 - The Project organization in three activity systems (created by the author)

As previously stated, this article focuses on one system – the Teacher Support Team. The aim was to find out (1) if and how the literacy teaching-learning discussion conducted created a context for teachers’ organization of reading and writing practices in their classes, and (2) the relationships between the work conducted in the Teacher Support Team and the one developed in the Teacher Continuing Education Meeting, as a space for pedagogical discussion. These results would reveal the expansion of literacy meaning production within the Teacher Support Team activity system across networks as chains that might reveal a creative or a reproductive reorganization. This reasoning based the selection of three episodes to be discussed below.

The first episode was chosen because it described the first meeting with the whole school in order to present the project and understand the school participants’ classroom work on reading and writing. Furthermore, these initial data provided insight concerning language organization in different classrooms subjects, as well as teacher and student roles in reading and writing tasks, all of them important baseline information for researchers’ comprehension and planning. The second episode was chosen because it focused on the relationship between the systems – the Teacher Support Team and Teacher Continuing Education, since it reveals a discussion with teachers of the reading process previously worked in a Teacher Support Team meeting. Furthermore, it pointed out how the literacy discussion at the meeting with the researchers was appropriated by the coordinator, supported the work conducted at the coordinator’s collective meeting with the teachers, and was again signified in a Teacher Support Team meeting. This process revealed the activity object expansion both across systems (Teacher Support Team and Teacher Continuing Education) and inside the same system (Teacher Support Team). Finally, the

third episode was chosen as a mean to discuss one of the teacher's new approaches on addressing the reading process, as she had initially revealed little or no participation in readings and theoretical-practical discussions during the meetings.

1st Episode (04/05/2010): Initial understanding of reading and writing in the classroom

This excerpt is part of the first meeting carried out in the school. There were four researchers, about twenty teachers, one coordinator, the principal and her deputy. We were in a circle in the video room. Our aim was to introduce the project and understand the senses and meanings the teachers of different subjects attributed to reading and writing, as well as how this comprehension based their reported literacy actions in that particular school. We also aimed at organizing the Teacher Support Team and deciding the day and time our meetings would be held – which should coincide with the Teacher Continuing Education meetings, as we had discussed with the managerial team.

The principal introduced us to the group and we described the project organization and objectives. The teachers revealed interest in taking part in the project, and made a commitment to deciding on how the Teacher Support Team would be composed as well as the days and times for meetings in the school, considering both teams' availabilities so as to enable us to initiate our work. As we had planned, we began with a "performance", so that the teachers could share how reading and writing were addressed in the classrooms. The aim was to allow us to begin to understand the predominant senses on reading and writing, in order to comprehend students' poor literacy domains.

Following our plan, in order to understand the participants' senses on how they addressed reading and writing, one of the researchers (O) asked the participants to write ten words that were directly related to cultural senses they considered reading and writing had in that school, and placed them on a pyramid. After that, they discussed their organizations in pairs and, later, we initiated the discussions with two questions:

- (1) What are the needs in terms of reading and writing at this school?
- (2) How have you been coping with these needs?

The excerpts below reveal their answers, and our expansion questions to better understand them. As nobody else started speaking, RM, a fifth-year Portuguese teacher, and the oldest at the school, started:³

RM: Well, I will be the first to speak. In the 5th year: ... ah ... we motivate students to read a lot; we find it difficult in ... in ... terms of concentration and attention from the students. This is very difficult; they are not concentrated; they do not pay attention in anything. (...). [The teacher presents her position on students' difficulty to read despite their effort.]

L: The children who are in the second, third grades, they are different ... we meet, discuss a proposal, read to them every day and every type of text ... we tell them the story and discuss what is there; we show them the books. What is the child going to learn with that? In fairy tales, what did you learn? Who are these people ... who is the witch in the fairy tale? Who is the

³ Analysis in brackets

prince? Who are you in the story? So that was what we tried to do with all the fairy tales, to bring to the child's reality and try to make that child awaken to reading, you see? [The teacher presents a different point of view, but the same focus on division of work in classroom that puts the center on the teacher thinking and reading for the student, and on the student passive role.]

C (Researcher): I would like to ask a question: how do the mathematics and history teachers work with reading? [The researcher asks for description of reading in content areas.]

[No answer]

RM: ... everyone has a copy of the book, the students, then we ... we also read to them, but I think it is all mechanical; you are there, they read, I read to them, they read, but I mean, I don't even know if they understand what they are reading because I think this kind of reading is mechanic ... after that, I give a little explanation. (...). [The teacher presents support for her traditional position of reading in her class - students read but they do not understand the text they read, students read mechanically, so the teacher reads aloud and explains the content.]

DA: I feel that they lack autonomy and also self-trust because often we read the text ... when it is their turn to read, they do. Things go rather well, but when they have to put pen to paper, they draw a blank, just as we do ... but what I think the most in my group are like that, when they have to read, they do it alone. They finish an activity and ask: 'Teacher, can I take the book out?' (...). [The teacher presents a conflicting position – students can read, they like to read, but have difficulty with writing. She also reveals her own uneasiness with writing.]

AC: (first grade teacher) (...) but I began with a song about the frog that is brief, and then from the song about the frog, I took just the initial characters – so as to avoid that memorizing of a,b,c,d,e. So I began with the f for frog (s for sapo) and, from this letter, we began to talk about what we need to form words, names, their names. That I need to join the letters; it is the joining of letters that form words and so then they began to understand that they need to join, in their little "earthworms", they need to put some letters because otherwise, they will not form words, you see? (...). [The teacher's description exemplifies the focus of reading and writing in her literacy class – the focus on the relationship between letters to form words, and the song as pretext to teach the letters.]

DE: (Math teacher) I also tell a lot of mathematics stories, also with the first-grade students, right? Also, we try to work in the practice, for example, with games, you see? (...), and this is a challenge to me now in math. (...) I am researching game questions that involve logical reasoning, right? [The teacher reveals reading and writing is not a focus in math class.]

C: Do students write? [The researcher asks for confirmation about students' reading and writing in math class.]

DE: ... no ... it is ... the quantity with real numbers, for example, number 1 and the notion of one quantity you see? (...) [The teacher confirms students do not write in mathematics class.]

O: Games have rules; is there any discussion about rules? [The researcher, herself a math teacher, expands C's question, which might bring another support to the ways reading and writing can be used in the math lesson.]

DE: before the ... before I start with the game ... we discuss what we are going to work with, what the function of this game is in mathematics, you see? [Teacher's answer focuses on placing the objective, pauses might reveal discomfort.]

FC: ... do they receive the rules or do you orally explain them? Is it all done in conversation form or do they actually have something in written form to refer to? [The researcher replaces O's question, this time, more directly, with a request for explanation about how the rules are worked and if this involves reading and writing.]

DE: Oh I see, Yes there is written form, I ... some games are a challenge for them in the fifth grade, you see? So, for example, I mean, there is a problem-solving situation; I divided them in groups, right? Give each of them a challenge and then, they have to solve this challenge. [The teacher's response does not answer the question.]

C: She is trying to find out the following: Do you read to each group what is written or they read silently? [The researcher clarifies FC's question.]

DE: ... sometimes ... so there are ... times in which they read and there are times in which they don't, moments in which I explain to them what is going to happen so that they can interpret later (...) [The teacher explains reading role in math class.]

FC: ... and do you feel that they find it difficult to understand the rules alone and do you do the same in the test (...) [The researcher questions for a position.]

DE: Yes, sometimes this happens and they don't understand it. Some do; some know it well, there are some that can read, and then they try to help their colleague, you know? It is their knowledge of how to work the Portuguese language and mathematics together, you see? [Reinforcement of a position - some 5th grade students have difficulty to read and they can't solve the math problems without help.]

FC: The student is having difficulty to read, the student is having difficulty to understand what does s/he need to do, then how do you deal with this? [Questions for a position.]

L: You think that they can read something, but they can't, then you explain later. [A teacher answers and summarizes – teachers usually explain the content to students.]

The above excerpt reveals the linear and transmissive approach and students' passive role concerning the teaching-learning senses and meanings that base teachers' work developed with reading and writing in classroom practices. Teachers' dialogue reveals diversity and opposition among them. However, they agree to the passive role they attribute to students in classrooms literacy actions, their low expectations toward them, and a lack of focus on reading and writing as processes. In fact, this excerpt shows that students barely read or write in classrooms, that teachers accomplish most cognitive work, that is, they read to students, and explain the content read. In other words, the focus is on content transmission. In RM words: *"We also read to them, because we think it is all mechanical; you are there, they read, I read to them, they read, but I mean, I don't even know if they understand what they are reading because I think this kind of reading is mechanic... After that, I give a little explanation"*.

The student is thus left with a passive role – listening, understanding teachers' explanations and copying from the board. The teachers' discourse reveals discordance concerning students' interest in reading, however their statements show that classroom action is centralized on the teachers' work. Besides, they attribute a passive role to the students, as revealed by L's talk on second graders: *"We read to them every day and every type of text (...) we tell them the story and discuss what is there; we show them the books (...)"*.

AC's description of her work with first graders reveals the focus of literacy learning on creating a context using a popular song for children's letters appropriation and word building that reveals the emphasis on decoding. In her words:

I began with a song [a popular one] about the frog that is brief, and then from the song about the frog, I took just the initial characters – so as to avoid that memorizing of *a, b, c, d, e, f*. So I

began with the *f for frog* (s para sapo) and, from this letter, we began to talk about what we need to form words, names, their names, that I need to join the letters; it is the joining of letters that forms words (...).

As she explained, there were alphabet posters all around the classroom walls, so students could look for the letters to build the words they need.

This episode also reveals how language organization created a movement between all participants, allowing each one to externalize his/her senses, talk about each other's ideas, ask for clarification, agree or disagree. Researchers' or other teachers' questions, and positions allowed us the comprehension of how reading and writing were addressed or not in classroom practices, as well as the students' and teacher's roles, key issues for the beginning of the intervention process.

It is important to say that the language organization, and the type of questions asked by the researchers, at the very beginning of the project, created the possibility to reach important information that based our work. However, the lack of modality in researchers' questions at this initial moment of joint work created affective-cognitive conflicts and tensions that led to an emotionally intense zone, as pointed out by John-Steiner (2000). This happened once the school participants had to take intellectual and emotional risks to describe, explain or clarify his/her classroom choices, concerning reading and writing. The pauses and silences in the math teacher's answers to researchers, when clarifying his actions about reading and writing in his class, for instance, reveals his discomfort, since the researchers' questions point out the lack of reading and writing in the work with math:

C: Do students write? [Evaluating question]

DE: ... no ... it is...the quantity with real numbers, for example, number 1 and the notion of one quantity you see? [Pauses indicating tension]

FC: "Do you read to each group what is written?"

DE: ... sometimes... so there are... times in which they read and there are times in which they don't, moments in which I explain to them what is going to happen so that they can interpret later (...). [Pauses indicating tension]

The researchers' objective was to provide the participants with the possibility to comprehend that they performed all cognitive roles in classroom, and students had few or no opportunities to become better reader or writers – the main problem at that school, as evaluated by the São Paulo State Index. This is revealed by FC's last utterance "*...the student is having difficulty to read, the student is having difficulty to understand what s/he needs to do? Then how do you deal with this?*" The question points out the need to transform the role of reading and writing in all classes, to give students cognitive roles in classrooms pedagogical practices.

To sum up this initial description, it also revealed and pointed out the need to involve the school in a collaborative work in order to transform this picture. The need would be on allowing learning to take place; not only on creating context for learning of a specific content, but new ways to think and intentionally act to involve students in reading and writing. Moreover, we knew there was a need to create a context of trust and respect

between all participants to allow that each would willingly be open to learn with the other and to give and receive support to/for others in their learning processes, as discussed by Edwards (2007).

As a result of this first meeting, we jointly planned the intervention to be initiated. We proposed that participants - in pairs - would videotape his/her classrooms to discuss together, in the Teacher Support Team meeting, the reading and writing senses and meanings based on the observed class, and how it created contexts for students' reading and writing learning and development. After the discussions, teachers were supposed to organize classes in which students had roles to read and write, and videotape the classrooms' new organization to be discussed again in the Teacher Support Team.

Thus, this first session, for most of the teachers, was the beginning of a process of reorganization of students' roles in classroom reading and writing tasks. The work developed in the Teacher Support Team system created a chain sometimes creative, sometimes reproductive, but it provided context for the reading and writing practices, doubts, comprehensions, processes and values to be repeatedly worked on. It also brought the possibilities of a production of a chain across systems as episode two reveals, since some teachers and the coordinators shared both systems.

2nd Episode (April 26, 2011): Planning a reading and writing lesson

With the end of the school year in Brazilian schools in December 2010, there were many changes in the Teacher Support Team, at the beginning of 2011. Many teachers were temporary and did not hold fixed positions at school, thus they were unable to remain in the project; other teachers could no longer attend the Teacher Support Team meetings. AC, the former first grade teacher, became the school's coordinator. In Brazilian state and city schools, teachers' mobility is, unfortunately, common especially in schools located in low-income suburbs of large cities. The participants for the 2011 school year were: four members of the Research Team - C, FC, M (Master student) and G (undergraduate student); ten teachers and the management team (the principal, her deputy and two coordinators - one of them was the former first grade teacher AC).

The episode to be discussed was coordinated by the researchers C and FC. It aimed at discussing the choices made by C who, in the previous meeting, had performed a first-grade teacher reading with students (teachers and the management team) the book "The Secret of the Gecko", a narrative poem⁴. The text had been projected on overhead, since one of the problems faced by the school was the lack of copies of the same book – and the impossibility to ask students to purchase their own copies.

The focus of the excerpt is on the discussion of choices that C had made when planning the lesson, and her aim in doing that. C starts the excerpt below in order to focus on the reading process, introduces the meeting objective and points out the choices made during the performance to focus on the reading and writing processes:

⁴ The secret of the gecko (O segredo da lagartixa) was written by Leticia Dansa, illustrated by Salmo Dansa, and edited by LTD.

C (R): Students need to learn the reading and writing processes, which is what we are doing here, so that they can internalize the organization of the text – if it is organized as a narrative or a descriptive text ... this is a key thing ... we are going to discuss here everything we did last meeting. What we did was to focus on the reading and writing processes, and what processes are those? [Evaluation question.]

This episode exemplifies the language organization in order to create a zone of proximal development with teachers, coordinators and researchers to discuss that working with reading and writing was not just reproducing what had been worked in the Teacher Support Team, but also stressing the reasons why the teacher had planned to act those ways. The excerpt below focuses on these issues:

AC (Coordinator): We spoke in the Teacher Continuing Education. [Coordinator clarifies she had brought the researcher's discussion to work with teachers in her regular meeting with them.]

FC: What did you talk about in the Teacher Continuing Education? [Researcher's question requests a position from the coordinator about what had been done.]

AC: I spoke about the text; I spoke about the introduction on the cover and about how it was introduced here – first the images and then the type of text, the vocabulary, you know? I spoke of all the dynamics that you used, I took everything to Teacher Continuing Education. [Coordinator summarizes she had mirrored the researcher task.]

C: But, why did we do that, did you tell them that? [Researcher asks a question to the coordinator to deepen her description and inform the work developed.]

AC: Well then, I didn't do that. [Short negative answer. She confirms she had mirrored C's actions with no further discussion.]

AC's utterances in response to FC's request for a description of the work developed with teachers, and C's demand for clarification reveals she had reproduced C's choices, without mentioning the theoretical-practical reasons that supported them: "*I spoke about the text; I spoke about the introduction of the cover and about how it was introduced here – first the images and then the type of text, the vocabulary, you know? I spoke of all the dynamics that you used, I took everything to the Teacher Continuing Education. But, I didn't do that*", (C's reason to act).

The researchers' questioning created a zone of proximal development to AC's comprehension that she had reproduced a practice only: "*why did we do that, did you tell them that?*" AC's answer reveals she had not focused on the concepts that had based the researcher's (C) discussion during the previous meeting. In fact, the appropriation of the doing without a relationship to the theoretical issues that base the decisions and choices made is a common issue in teachers' and coordinators' training contexts. FC's next utterance brings the meeting objective to further expand the relationship between practice and the theory that bases it.

FC: Do you remember, I can ask those who were here, right? [Referring to those present on previous meeting]. The coordinator reviewed what was shown first in the images, right? Then

we read the power point presentation; then what happens is, one thing is, what did we do? As C was saying, we are trying to discover the reasons for things, rather than simply repeating this activity in another way [Focusing on the objective of the meeting]. In order to do the analysis, we will think of what the teacher's planning process would be for this activity [The objective of the discussion]; what this teacher would do in order to think on how to organize the lesson to recover the planning process of the activity [Question to clarify the objective]. It is not the actual activity; it is the planning of it. What did a teacher think in order to plan the activities? [The meeting organizing question.]

This episode demonstrates how the project's design enhanced the researchers', teachers' and the coordinators' learning about the reading process appropriation by AC, while focusing on the same reading task in two different activity systems – the Teacher Support Team, the Teacher Continuing Education, and again in the Teacher Support Team. It allowed AC (coordinator) to evaluate her reproductive appropriation of the discussion developed in the previous Teacher Support Team and her performance, based on the current Teacher Support Team discussion. Although the chain revealed an initial reproductive appropriation, it also constructed a context for the object into discussion expansion.

As discussed by Liberali (2006), the design made possible for the same concepts to be discussed in different activity systems, creating the possibility of a chain that reflects the production and the expansion of the object - reading and writing senses and meanings - across systems and within the same system, enhancing the possibility of learning and development. Liberali points out that the activity chain creatively involves “(...) *partners in an activity producing shared meanings that later will be part of the senses that some of those involved will share with other subjects in other activities.*” (p. 48)

If we recuperate AC's senses in the first episode as a first-grade teacher, her work in Teacher Continuing Education as coordinator, although in this example it is reproductive, reveals a reorganization from her previous work as a first-grade teacher (see Episode 1). Also, her participation during the discussions shows her intentionality to learn and to change reading and writing at school. One can say that this episode exemplifies the language organization to create a zone of proximal development with teachers to collaboratively produce new meanings about the reading and writing, across systems that share partially the same object.

Figure 2 below shows a chain that created a context for the same concept, that had been initially shared during the Teacher Support Team discussion, focused on by the coordinator in Teacher Continuing Education, and critically negotiated and expanded in another meeting of the Teacher Support Team, as part of a diverse task initiated by the question: “*What did a teacher think in order to plan the (reading) activities?*”

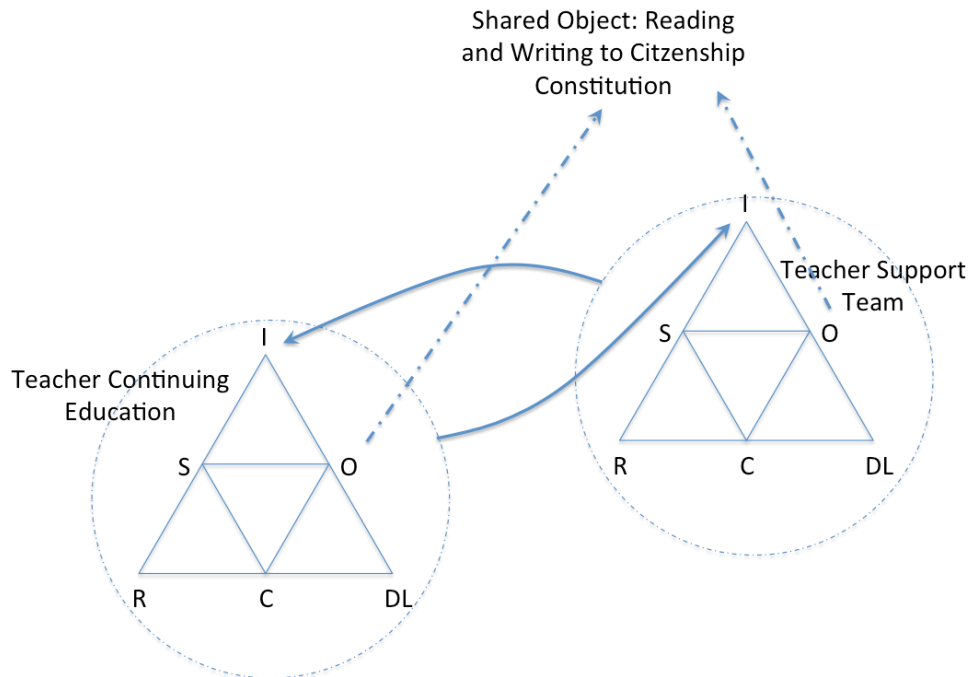


Figure 2: Creative Chain (built by the author)

Figure 2 reveals how the senses and meanings on reading and writing shared initially in the Teacher Support Team were discussed across systems as well as in the same system. That is, the researchers and the school participants in the Teacher Support Team initiated a discussion that was later reproduced by the coordinator during the Teacher Continuing Education System session. Another discussion in the Teacher Support Team created the possibility for the same concepts to be negotiated again, and based on new theoretical-practical contexts to be expanded. This possibility created a mutual zone of proximal development for learning and development for all participants. So, the methodological design gave rise to the possibility for participants to continuously understand and transform their shared discussions, across systems and within the same system. It is important to note that each system creates the possibility of a chain that reflects the production and the expansion of the object – reading and writing senses and meanings to citizenship constitution – across systems and within the same system, enhancing the possibility for learning and development. It defines the concept of “creative chain” as discussed by Liberali (2006, p. 48).

3rd Episode (7/06/2011): Classroom Reading Lesson

This episode was chosen since it reveals AR’s attempts to organize her class based on the reading concepts, as well as on the rules and division of labor we had worked on. It is important to say that AR was not an active participant at the beginning of our work at the school, revealing no interest in discussing her senses on the concepts being discussed, or on her colleagues’ reading classes presentations. As the project went on, she started bringing questions, doubts, revealing an active interest on classroom language organization to critical collaboration and on how to deal with students’ difficulties with reading and writing. By the end of 2010 and in 2011, she revealed a growing interest in

debating her reading and writing processes as well as on ways to reorganize literacy work in her classroom.

The episode below reveals that AR is still struggling to create critical collaborative relations to involve her second-grade students in silent reading to intentionally act on the production of critical collaborative meaning. It shows her intention to act based on the concepts discussed during our work together. That is, guiding students' attention to the objective of the reading task, to the reading situation, to the text genre organization and to the verbal-visual characteristics available to meaning production. She also creates a context for silent reading, and to engage students to critically question racism, which is, according to her, a problem in her classroom. However, language organization is usually linear, and she centralizes almost all the instructional discourse based on a pattern teacher-student-teacher. That is, although AR tries to involve students in the interaction, she rarely organizes language to create critical collaborative relations between them, in order to allow for the sharing of meaning that would direct students to justify their answers and to establish controversies between points of view.

The context she creates, although involving students in a dialogical interaction, does not allow them to develop the capacity to offer and ask for support from others (Edwards, 2007) in order to question their own answers as well as those of their colleagues, or to talk on each other's reasoning, central to a dialectic and collaborative interactional organization. AR is the one responsible for all initiations and evaluations of students' answers, establishing a linear relation in classroom language organization, as well as an individual focus, as commonly seen in school contexts.

The interaction is organized based on "instructional questions" that did not allow students to bring new ideas to the discussion (Nystrand, 1997, apud Wertsch 1998, p. 120). That is, her questions create contexts for students posing a point of view and for recuperating the text organization, however, she rarely asks for expansion, or creates a possibility for critical-collaborative relations between students' answers. We can see this organization in the excerpt bellow:

AR: In our lesson today, we are going to read and then we will discuss the story. What did happen in the story? What is the purpose of our class? What is the purpose of reading?

St: Learning to read. [Unquestioning schooled answer.]

St: To use our imagination when reading.

AR: To use our imagination, when reading. [Mirroring - unquestioning acceptance.]

St: Identifying the story.

AR: Identifying the story. [Mirroring - unquestioning acceptance.]

St: Learning to read.

AR: What else? [Unquestioning acceptance.]

St: Paying attention, when reading. [Schooled answer.]

AR: What else? [Unquestioning acceptance.]

St: If you do not pay attention, you cannot read. [Schooled observation.]

R: What else? Only these goals? Max?

Max: Learning to read arouses the enjoyment of reading. [Schooled answer.]

AR: Learning to read awakes the enjoyment of reading. [Schooled observation – mirroring.]

The above excerpt shows how AR initiates her reading class by establishing an objective focused on students paying attention and understanding the story content. As I have already pointed out, language organization is linear, and AR maintains the interaction in a comfortable situation that echoes schooled points of view as revealed by students' answers. Albeit, it is important to say that this initial organization was a great change if we compare it to the first episode discussed. That is, students' silent reading and the placement of the task goal are important reorganizations in the conduction of the reading class. AR says they will project the book on the wall, since there are not enough books for all students. She continues: "*Well, now you will read silently. Then we'll talk about the story. I'll give you guys enough time to read*".

A teacher's colleague projects the book on the wall. The students read, get up to read closer to the text, whisper, laugh, make comments about the story, some say they have finished, others ask for more time. The moves reveal students' interest in reading the story. After the silent reading, AR focuses on the text narrative organization, offering the students the possibility of appropriating it as a cultural artifact.

The excerpt below also shows AR's attempts to ask critical questions in order to encourage students to justify their answers, though she does not create the possibility of intertwining their voices, as pointed out by Edwards (2007). Language organization is still linear, and interaction is organized, as emphasized by Wertsch (1998, p. 121), based on Mehan, (1979) "*teachers' initiation, students reply and teachers' evaluation*".

AR: Now let's talk about the story. Our story matched your previous hypotheses about it? [Students match hypothesis raised before reading but she did not expand their answers.]

Sts: Yes. *All together.*

AR: Raise your hands to speak, so we all can hear each other. What happened in the beginning of the story? [Focus on the story organization.]

AR: Reading this book, what type of text is this? [Requests students to talk about the text organization.]

Sts: Narrative.

AR Why do you think that is? [AR asks for explanation.]

St: Because the animals talk. [AR accepts the student's mistaken answer.]

St: It is a narrative.

AR: Why? [Asks for explanation.]

Sts: Because it tells a story.

AR: In a narrative text what comes first? [Accepts the answer and question for narrative organization.]

St: The description of where the story takes place, the characters, presentation of the main characters.

AR: And after? [Accepts the answer and asks for continuity.]

Sts: The problem.

AR: And what was the problem? [Asks for clarification.]

Sts: The colours could not mix.

AR: And after that. Comes what? [Asks for continuity.]

St: The problem.

Sts: There are two problems.

AR: Two problems? [Questions for expansion.]

Sts: Yes, (indistinct).

AR: How were they resolved? [Asks for story conclusion.]

Sts: The colours decided to mix.

AR: And after the problems were resolved, what happened? [Asks for the problem solution.]

Sts: Romeo and Juliet could be together.

During the text discussion, AR is in control of all questions, as well as asking problematic questions in order to guide students to clarify, support, and expand their answers, share their reasoning, raise doubts, pose challenges, make suggestions, and to describe experiences with racism as means to relate the story read to their real lives. This questioning pattern reveals her intention in enhancing students' participation in the classroom work in critical ways and to create a context for citizenship constitution by relating the story read to real social racist behaviour in society. The excerpt below exemplifies this interactional pattern.

AR: In the story, there was separation of people by colour. And in our life today, is there something that is separated by colour? [AR establishes a problematic issue.]

Sts: No.

AR: But there was some time ago? [AR does not question students' answers; instead she reorganizes the time-space of her question.]

Sts: Yes.

St: People were separated.

AR: Why are/were they separated? [Questions for explanation.]

Sts: Because of their skin colour.

Sts: Black, white, brown, brown (all together).

AR: Oh yeah, black, white, brown. Why? [Request for support.]

Sts: There are white people who do not like black ones, and black people who do not like white ones.

Al: There are blacks that do not like whites.

AR: Is it okay to separate people by the colour of skin? [Request for students' positions.]

Sts: No.

St: We have to see people for their character and not by colour. [Student expands his/her answer – there were other answers in the same direction.]

AR: How do we call it? [Request for explanation.]

Sts: Racism.

AR: Racism, and what else? [Accepts and asks for other types]

Sts: Prejudice.

AR: As you noticed, there are a lot of colours in the story. Now you guys will work the colours with the English teacher, ok?

Final Remarks

As discussed earlier, the work at school was motivated by the low awareness of students' reading and writing. The three episodes presented showed how the organization of the project as interrelated activity systems enabled the whole school involvement in the construction of a collective object/motive – reading and writing teaching–learning to students' citizenship constitution. The objective of the project was to involve the school as a community, who discuss together their theoretical-practical decisions while understanding and transforming the ways in which reading and writing were addressed in the classrooms, in the teachers' continuing education and in the school management team.

The organization of the project in three different activity systems enhanced on the whole school possibilities of the reading and writing teaching-learning processes appropriation. The organization of chains across activities systems exemplified by the relationship between the Teacher Continuing Education and the Teacher Support Team, and within the Teacher Support Team system, enhanced the production of shared meanings concerning reading and writing processes and how to reorganize classroom teaching-learning.

In fact, the Teacher Support Team allowed us to critically follow the team of professionals jointly reflecting and growing together while analysing both the language and the students' and teachers' roles in reading and writing tasks in their classes. It also created the possibility of a chain that reflected the production and the expansion of the object - reading and writing senses and meanings - within the system, enhancing the possibility of learning and development to all participants.

The theoretical-practical work developed was targeted at creating mutual zones of proximal development that supported teachers, coordinators and the principal with the appropriation of reading and writing as processes, rather than just reading to the students, writing on the board, having stories dictated by the students, as well as understanding reading and writing isolated from the text generic organization, that necessarily involves the understanding of utterance context, the organization of the discourse, and the linguistic choices (Bakhtin, 1950/1992).

The methodological choices that organized the project as systems of activity enabled the reorganization of alienated thinking and acting (Marx, 1844-45/2007), common in schools, as described in Episode 1, and also provided social and political transformation to the educational system, as pointed out by Vygotsky (1924-25), revealed in the second and third episodes. For instance, the researchers' language organization in episodes 1 and 2 were intentionally designed to create contexts for participants to listen to one another, but

also to produce conflicts and tensions which culminated in collective meaning construction toward reading and writing in difficult contexts, as this one. Episode 3 reveals a teacher's attempts to reorganize her reading class, and to use questioning to involve students in critical knowledge construction.

To sum up, the three episode descriptions revealed that the methodological organization of the intervention research enabled researchers and practitioners to create mutual zones of proximal development through reciprocal actions. They involve conflicts and tensions motivated by affective-cognitive issues and anxiety about revealing ignorance, and sometimes inability to accept criticism. Such issues created a zone of emotional intensity (John-Steiner, 2000), as participants took intellectual and emotional risks but also negotiated meanings in collaborative and critical ways, as revealed in Episode 2. Though reorganization was observed, there was a long way to go, since the data discussed here was the beginning of a transformational process.

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