ARTICLES

School Failure and Children's Literacy in the Core Education Project (CEP) for Latin America and the Caribbean (1980-2000) [1] [2] [3] [4]

Fracasso escolar e alfabetização de crianças no Projeto Principal de Educação (PPE) para a América Latina e o Caribe (1980-2000)

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Abstract

The paper analyzes central ideas that permeated the discussions promoted by Unesco on children's literacy and school failure. The discussions were developed in the scope of the Core Education Project for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEP - 1980-2000). It challenges the supposed neutrality in the action of Unesco through the critical analysis of Bulletins produced throughout this project. It takes Mikhail Bakhtin's thoughts on the notion of utterance as a theoretical-methodological reference. It concludes that school failure was seen as a core education problem in Latin America and the Caribbean, based on economic guidelines that were very close to the interests of institutions that were sought to fund educational initiatives to reduce this great challenge.

Keywords: Core Education Project, Unesco, Children literacy, School failure, Latin America and the Caribbean

Resumo

Este artigo analisa ideias centrais que permearam as discussões promovidas pela Unesco sobre alfabetização infantil e fracasso escolar produzidas no âmbito do Projeto Principal de Educação para a América Latina e o Caribe (PPE – 1980-2000). Problematiza a suposta neutralidade na atuação da Unesco por meio da análise crítica de textos publicados nos Boletins produzidos na vigência desse projeto. Toma como referencial teórico-metodológico pensamentos de Mikhail Bakhtin. Conclui que o fracasso escolar foi considerado problema central da educação na América Latina e no Caribe, com base em balizas economicistas que muito se aproximavam dos interesses de instituições procuradas para financiamento de iniciativas educativas para redução desse grande desafio.

Palavras-chave: *Projeto Principal de Educação, Unesco, Alfabetização de crianças, Fracasso escolar, América Latina e Caribe*

Initial Considerations

The Core Education Project for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEP - 1980-2000), approved in 1980 at the 21st Meeting of the Unesco General Conference, and developed between 1980 and 2000, aimed at providing basic schooling for children, overcoming illiteracy, and improving the quality and efficiency of Latin American and Caribbean educational systems. To achieve these goals, the countries involved decided to "ensure to all full and equal access to education, the free search for its objective truth and the free exchange of ideas and knowledge" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [Unesco] & Regional Office of Education for Latin America and the Caribbean [Orealc][5], 2001). It is worth mentioning that, since Unesco creation (November 16, 1945), universal access to education has been one its pillars for maintaining peace in the world. In disseminating this intention, the international

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[5] Together with Unesco, the Regional Office of Education for Latin America and the Caribbean (Orealc) is responsible for the production of the Bulletins, is one of Unesco offices with the clear duty of implementing its regional activities. Besides the office located in Santiago, Chile, others were spread throughout the regions of Africa, the Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean. In addition to Orealc, we have identified three other regional offices with references specifically targeted to education: one in Dakar (working in Africa), one in Beirut (working in the Arab States), and one in Bangkok (working in Asia and the Pacific).

organization has, throughout history, built an image aligned with an action that is supposedly neutral and detached from private interests.

Based on the Bakhtinian perspective on language, which is our theoretical and methodological anchor point, we aimed at understanding the actions devoted to children's literacy. This implies reviewing the texts that were directed to it, as in the human and social sciences, "Regardless of what the objectives of a research are, only the text can be the starting point" (Bakhtin, 2006, p. 308, our translation). That is why we bet on a documentary research (Sá-Silva Almeida & Guindani, 2009) through Bakhtinian lenses to understand the meanings produced by the speeches enunciated in this Project that, full of answers (Bakhtin, 2006), demand from the researcher a dialogic posture considering the documents reviewed.

Making this ethical-political choice, we recognize the word as an "ideological phenomenon[6], par excellence" (Bakhtin & Volochínov, 2010, p. 36, our translation), because it is set up based on points of view about the world, or rather, from historical and socially referenced perspectives - therefore, the word is filled with meanings. The CEP (1980-2000) fits into this condition, intentionally leaded by agents who demanded answers from its addressees. In this case, compatible with interests that had nothing impartial or neutral. Therefore, assuming the word as an ideological phenomenon implies understanding it in its context of production, in its direction (its social audience) and in its intentionality.

In order to analyze the speech on children's literacy and school failure in the CEP (1980-2000), we share the data produced from reading the articles of the Bulletins, documents produced during the project, in order to reflect our understanding about a dynamic intentionally produced around economic interests. Analyzing the articles section of the Bulletins and keeping the focus on early childhood literacy, all statements produced had the Bakhtinian lens as the main theoretical and methodological support, understanding that the supposed neutrality attached to the image of Unesco is subject to problematization.

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[6] Our Bakhtinian understanding of ideology is based on the polysemy of words. That is why it differs from the Marxist and Althusserian concepts of ideology. We understand this concept from the idea of enunciate proposed by Bakhtin and Volochínov (2010), a product of verbal interaction, a bridge between subjects and also an arena in which different world positions are reflected and refracted.

pro·posições

CEP (1980-2000): objectives, dynamics and its Bulletins

Understanding the context in which the objectives of the CEP (1980-2000) were established, it should be mentioned that this project emerged from the request of the Ministers of Education, Planning and Economics, who attended the Regional Conference of Ministers of Education and Ministers in charge of Economic Planning of the Member States in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Mexico in 1979. Convened by Unesco in cooperation with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and with the Organization of American States (OAS), the speeches in this meeting resulted in the Declaration of Mexico (Declaración de México, 1979), which recognized the extreme poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean, the low schooling level of its population, its high rates of illiteracy (almost 30%) and of "dropout"[7] in the early years of schooling, as well as the need to readjust the curriculum. It was in this context that the CEP (1980-2000) emerged, aiming to:

a) **Achieve basic schooling** for school-age children and offer them a minimum general education of 8 to 10 years;

b) **Overcome illiteracy**, develop and expand educational services for youth and adults with incipient or no schooling;

c) **Improve the quality and efficiency** of education systems, and of teaching at large, by promoting the necessary reforms and designing effective systems for measuring learning (Unesco/Orealc, 2001, emphasis added).

Achieving the universalization of basic education, overcoming illiteracy, and improving quality and efficiency of education systems have not proven to be contradictory and/or inopportune. They very much satisfy the public interest of granting quality education for all. However, when understood through the above-mentioned lenses, they show the need for the preparation of a workforce with minimal knowledge, supposedly capable of transforming a

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[7] We used quotation marks for this word in order to demarcate a discourse that needs to be problematized. Our translation to the Spanish expression *deserción escolar* (which, according to the dictionary, would refer to the term "withdrawal"), "evasion" brings about meanings that blame the subjects and overshadows the continuous and progressive process of exclusion of children from school. Thus, the quotation marks are intended to delimit "someone else's word," which we do not want to make our own, a concept on which we do not want to leave our "signature."

marginal condition, a result of the State's also supposed inefficiency in providing adequate education.

According to Unesco, the objectives of the CEP (1980-2000) reflected the real educational needs of Latin America and the Caribbean. Therefore, the organization aligned the discussions proposed in meetings promoted by the CEP Regional Intergovernmental Committee (1980-2000) in order to achieve the established goals: Promedlac I (Mexico, 1984); Promedlac II (Bogota, 1987); Promedlac III (Guatemala, 1989); Promedlac IV (Quito, 1991); Promedlac V (Santiago, 1993); Promedlac VI (Kingston, 1996); and Promedlac VII (Cochabamba, 2001). The participation of the Ministers of Education of the Member States and official representatives was imperative, which guaranteed the due prominence of the declarations and recommendations produced in these meetings and addressed to the governments of Latin American and Caribbean countries.

In addition to these documents, during the life of the CEP (1980-2000) 50 periodicals were also produced, called Bulletins, whose functions were:

> […] register, comment and disseminate the activities that the Member States of the region carry out within the framework of the Core Project, as well as those that are developed at the regional and subregional levels as a result of horizontal cooperation and international cooperation in support of national efforts for the fulfillment of the objectives established to the Project (Unesco/Orealc, 1982, p. 3, our translation).

The Bulletins, therefore, aimed at recording, processing and disseminating the demands and actions of the countries involved in the CEP (1980-2000), as well as theoretical and practical contributions. In them, the 1980s and 1990s were often placed in a context of deep economic crisis and urgent need for reorganization of public systems, aiming at greater efficiency. The production of these materials, however, was alien to the critical analyses of different authors on neo-liberalism, which was becoming hegemonic in Latin America and the Caribbean at the time.

Anderson (1995), for example, already warned about this logic that questioned the Welfare State, considered as destroyers of the ideas of freedom and competition, on which everyone's prosperity depended. The author already warned about the risks of defending a minimal State that was strong against the power of unions and in the control of money, but weak in social expenditures, with the objective of maintaining monetary stability. For Saviani (2008), in the educational field these ideas consolidated senses about an incompetence of the

State in managing the common good, one of the causes of failure of public school considered of poor quality and inadequate at the time - very strong rhetoric in the documents.

Given the silence of the Bulletins in relation to these criticisms, we apprehend that Unesco, through Orealc, aggregated in the CEP (1980-2000) different points of view on issues concerning education, specifically literacy among children, however overvaluing some correlation with private interests that emphasized the inefficiency of educational systems. This indication led us to problematize the supposed neutrality of Unesco's actions. The enunciative configurations (authorship, addressees, organizational composition) of the Bulletins and their speeches about the appropriation of reading and writing by children (conceptions and discussions more reiterated) showed us some indications that reinforced the need for this problematization.

Enunciative-discursive composition of the Bulletins

According to dictionary meanings, "bulletin" can be defined as: "1 News review for internal or external circulation. 2 Official publication of a public or private entity […]" (Aulete, 2009, p. 109, our translation). Therefore, the material on which we paid attention had descriptive, expository and informative functions, with the purpose of updating the addressees. In Bulletin 50 (Unesco/Orealc, 1999, p. 2, our translation), these meanings were confirmed, since it was defined that these documents '[…] have made their contribution in the dissemination of the Project objectives as well as the themes and subjects that have made up the rich baggage of ideas that emerged in the region while progress was made in fulfilling the proposed educational goals.'

The 50 Bulletins were produced with the explicit purpose of disseminating the objectives of the CEP (1980-2000), as well as subjects and themes discussed in the meetings. Their publication started in 1982 (two years after the beginning of the work of the Core Project) and ended in 1999, with periodicity varying between one, two and even three publications a year. The quarterly frequency was the most recurrent one.

In its internal composition, we observed a fixed organization composed of a summary, a presentation section (in which the purposes of the document and a summary of the discussions were presented) followed by texts dealing with the Core Project: agreements between the

member countries, resolutions, articles that would contribute to the debates, activities of Unesco/Orealc in the Project, sponsored publications, a contract for subscription to the Bulletin, among others. Covers (Figure 1) showed three different presentations over the 20 years of the CEP (1980-2000).

Figure 1

Bulletin covers produced during the life of the CEP (1980-2000)

Source: Unesco/Orealc (accessed on: Jan. 5, 2016).

As we can see, there is the effective presence of writing (identification of the project, the document itself and the authorship) without any images or pictures, which can help to build an objective character for the documents. This presentation, in our view, corroborates the dictionary meaning and instigates us to problematize the technical and neutral nature that was intended to impress to the text, as if it could be free of subjective interests or even ideologies. As we have already stated, the sign is a human production and, therefore, ideological, constituted by and constituting certain contexts.

The Summary and Presentation of the Bulletins record more intensely recommendations, resolutions, orientations and forecasts of actions in the scope of the CEP (1980-2000), besides formalizing the establishment of working groups. As for the articles, the section on which we have dedicated more attention aiming at mapping the guidelines for children's literacy, it is worth noting that they began to appear in 1986 and gradually took up most of the Bulletins, because, "Over time, […] they have become part of the development of

educational thought in the region, marking a concrete contribution in the development of new paradigms in this field" (Unesco/Orealc, 1999, p. 3, our translation). These statements show us how the supposed neutrality fades away since, in addition to describing, exposing and informing, the Bulletins also guided and tried to shape the actions of the region around the objectives of the CEP (1980-2000) and the interests linked to it.

Still on the articles[8] and their intentionality, we noticed that the themes "Education Quality" and "Literacy/Illiteracy" were two of the most present. Specifically regarding literacy, speeches were emphatically focused on discussions about school failure, understood through the bias of the lack of quality of education and the inefficiency of the systems. In brief, besides contributing to the building of Latin American and Caribbean thought to achieve the objectives of the CEP (1980-2000), the Bulletins showed some interest for some themes in particular.

As for the authorship of these texts, we must note the strong presence of authors[9] linked to international organizations — 9 directly linked to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) or the World Bank (WB) and 76 to Universities or Academic Centers around the world. Some of them were also linked to Unesco. Besides these, there was an effective participation of 40 subjects directly linked to Unesco/Orealc (consultants), 41 holding various technical positions[10], and 18 involved in high political offices. To a lesser extent, we can include: one author linked to the International Literacy Year Committee of Trinidad and Tobago and another to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), one physician, one social scientist, one education researcher, one professor with a high academic degree, one economist, one international specialist in education, one philosopher, two psychologists, three authors linked to Non-Governmental Organizations and/or Foundations, four specialists, and additional four authors linked to ECLAC. There are also five authors whose connections were not informed and two of whom we were not able to specify them (there was no description of the acronyms indicated in their authorship data). Two texts were signed by Unesco and two by Orealc. In addition, Amnesty International, the governments of Peru and Chile, Unesco (together with Unicef), the World Bank (WB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the

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[8] One aspect that we need to emphasize is that some themes permeate others, that is, they cross the texts.

[9] It is worth noting that there are authors who have held different positions, being linked to more than one institution.

[10] We included in the technical positions all the authors linked to any institution, public or private, that provided advice or opinions on education in the CEP member countries (1980-2000). We also added those who participated in different projects sponsored by these countries and research foundations.

IDB also produced articles.

Considering this panorama, we observed that most of the authors who published most in the Bulletins had direct relationships with Unesco/Orealc and/or international organizations. This fact should be analyzed in the context of the CEP (1980-2000) constitution - amidst the strengthening of neo-liberal policies throughout Latin America and the Caribbean - and of Unesco's activities - linked to funding entities.

Still on authorship, the data showed an aspect that deserves attention: the presence of authors who maintained the focus on the themes "school failure" and "quality of education," opting for a discursive line that deliberately highlighted the loss of resources produced by disapproval (already scarce due to the crisis the region was going through). In this sense, his articles enunciated points of view marked by a strongly economistic bias. In a period of profound economic adjustments, broad defense of neoliberal principles and influences from international funding agencies (WB, for example), their texts reached discussions involving education and literacy specifically, through a market logic that questioned about spending efficiency.

Unesco, in reference to the people and countries involved in its education-oriented projects, stated in one of its Bulletins that "its members are specialists or scientists or if they are mass organizations (unions, cooperatives, associations and youth movements)" (Unesco/Orealc, 1998, p. 72, our translation). We believe in the concern of this organization in relation to the reliability of data and the credibility of the notes, as well as in relation to the care with the authorial competence of those who would dialogue with the direct addressees of these publications (Governments of Latin America and the Caribbean) about what would be necessary to achieve the intended objectives.

However, in the context of the CEP production (1980-2000), we evaluated the intention of an institution that, through the technical and specialized competence of its consultants, simulated an apparent neutrality of its writings, using an advertisement that claimed it was aligned with the promotion of the common good. It tried to demonstrate, therefore, a supposedly neutral and ideologically unbinding performance. In our analysis, this Unesco strategy was and is crucial to build consensus and allowed, through the Bulletins, to consolidate perspectives that bet on the primacy of economic indicators to think about education.

Understanding the technical rationality of the Bulletins, the emergence of the Core Project in a context of crisis in Latin America and the Caribbean, the disregard for criticism of neoliberal logic, and a supposed neutrality of the discursive acts proposed by Unesco/Orealc, we started a detailed reading of the Bulletins, searching for the meanings assigned to literacy. This comprehensive-responsive process revealed exclusive and excluding points of view to think about the learning of reading and writing by Latin American and the Caribbean children. This is what we wish to discuss in the next section.

Speeches on children literacy: School failure as an impairment to the development of nations, and a mark of inefficiency of educational systems

The critical-responsive reading of the Bulletins' statements about children's literacy indicated the same discursive plot around a recurring theme: school failure. During the 20 years of the Core Project, this theme was insistently reiterated in these documents, changing nuances in the treatment, but emphasized as a central problem of education in Latin America and the Caribbean. In our analysis, the systematic and orderly repetition of these discussions corroborates a hypothesis that these materials were strategies to build consensus on the promotion of certain educational projects and programs in the countries of the region.

Some of these projects were the *Ciclos de Alfabetização* (Literacy Cycles) instituted in the 1980s and 1990s throughout Brazil Specifically in the state of Espírito Santo, these cycles were named *Bloco Único* (Single Block), and restructured the pedagogical time of the first two grades of the former Elementary School into a single block of studies, with no failure between them. Gontijo (2016) points to the *Bloco Único* (among other official actions) as one of the strategic actions to achieve the goals set by the CPE, specifically the provision of basic education to all children of school age, i.e., basic education universalization. For the author, the prohibition of failing students would guarantee the absorption of a large part of new enrollments at low cost. In this way, the school failure statistics would be reduced without the necessary investments in the construction of school buildings, for example.

In Table 1, we organize data produced from the reading of the Bulletins and define how school failure was analyzed. We observed changes in the focus of the statements that can be

explained mainly by the context in which they were produced; however, reiteration was constant. Understanding their intentionality, to whom they were addressed, and their authorship, we reached the ideological potential of these statements.

Table 1

Treatment given to the theme School Failure in the Bulletins (EPP - 1980-2000)11

Bulletin	Bulletin Publication Year	Approach of the Theme School Failure	Number of Bulletins
Nº 2	1982		
Nº 3	1983		
Nº 6	1985	Failure, "dropout," school failure in Basic Education	6
Nº 21	1990		
Nº 38	1995		
Nº 40	1996		
Nº 12	1987	Relationship between school failure and waste of investments	2
Nº 18	1989		
Nº 9	1986	Failure in Child Literacy and Basic Education interrelated with adult and functional illiteracy	3
Nº 13	1987		
Nº 24	1991		
Nº 32	1993	School Failure in Children's Literacy	1
Nº 17	1988	School Failure and State Action	2
Nº 16	1988		
Nº 19	1989		
Nº 24	1991	School Failure and Education Quality (efficiency and effectiveness): inefficiency of educational systems; generation of costs; public management of resources	6
Nº 25	1991		
Nº 28	1992		
Nº 31	1993		
Nº 29	1992	School Failure, Education Quality and Criticism of Traditional Teaching Methods	2
Nº 30	1993		
Nº 10-11	1986	Need to invest in rural education in order to "eliminate" high "dropout" and failure rates, overcoming age/serial distortion	1
Nº 21	1990		
Nº 22	1990	School Failure as a Challenge in the Countries of the Region	3
Nº 23	1990		
Nº 41	1996	Relations with the teaching profession	1

Source: Own elaboration (2021).

Table 1 shows the emphasis attached to the theme of school failure and the change in emphasis for the analysis of this problem. The statements then went from concern with failure, "dropout" and school leaving (representations of school failure) and their relationship with adult

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11 Table 1 was prepared based on the reading of the articles in the Bulletins. Although the same article gave more than one treatment to the theme "school failure," Table 1 shows the greater emphasis evidenced in the reading.

illiteracy to its reiteration as a synonym for inefficiency in education systems (referring to wasted investments, generation of additional costs, lack of quality in education, or even the need for State action). Initially analyzed as a concern, school failure has taken center stage in discussions about the problems of education in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In this composition, it was considered an important hindrance toward achieving the goals of the CEP (1980-2000), as it represented significant losses of scarce investments, in addition to being an impediment to individual and national development. It is important to register that initial discussions were not abandoned, but intertwined with other approaches, adding to the old statements something new that gradually took on the focus of the statements in the articles: the interrelation between failure and inefficiency of educational systems (in teaching and in managing public resources, besides promoting national development).

The emphasis on this theme was so strong that not even child literacy itself was discussed to the same extent. We found that 27 Bulletins dealt with school failure at some point. Children's literacy, in turn, was expressed as a specific field of knowledge in 12 Bulletins (which may also suggest the possibility that literacy in the countries is synonymous with failure). As the failure of children was concentrated in the early grades of Basic Education (the stage of schooling where literacy is most systematically required), even the dialogues about teaching children to read and write were permeated by concern about school failure. Given the emphasis, this situation demanded countries to promote actions focused on new methodologies, observing in the Bulletins the reiteration of sharing pedagogical innovations and successful experiences (concerns that were strongly present since the beginning of the project, but which were stressed in the materials produced from 1989 on).

It is also interesting to note that the Bulletins produced at the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s recovered and expanded the statements on pedagogical inefficiency (through the production of illiterates, increased number of failing and 'dropped out' students and the disqualification of education), and more broadly intensified the criticism of the system inefficiency (waste of investments, generation of costs, poor public management of resources), and the damage caused to national development. The context in which these statements are inserted may explain the centrality of the discussions, since it is at this time that neo-liberalism is strengthened, dictating rules for the efficiency of spending on social policies.

This last assertion prevails among the articles produced on this theme. In this sense, we find there is the predominance of a certain perspective, a certain point of view, a certain intentionality on the most referenced theme in the Bulletins regarding Primary Education and literacy. For Bakhtin (2006), the intention is one of the fundamental elements in the production of statements, determining a certain bias. In brief, there are no neutral texts.

Our analyses do not disregard the importance of the concern with school failure, as we also consider the alarming data that defined the beginning of these discussions: "Over a number of 1,000 students incorporated into Primary Education, statistics show that in half of the countries considered those who reach the 4th grade do not exceed 800, while less than 700 reach the 6th grade" (Unesco/Orealc, 1985, p. 8, our translation). The highest rates were concentrated in the early years of Primary Education and in rural regions, as described in the Bulletins. In some countries, rates were as high as 10% in Primary Education and in others, more than 20%.

Later in the 1980s, the concerns remained. Schiefelbein et al. (1989) claimed that one in four students suffered with failure. If half the students in the first grade were failing in 1980, by 1987 the rate was 40%. As regards these statements, Schiefelbein & Wolff (1993) went on to reveal statistics over the course of the CEP (1980-2000), noting that by the mid-1990s, Latin America and the Caribbean had the highest failure rates in the world: around 40%.

In the same article, the authors stated that children in the first grades, from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, living in rural areas and not speaking the official language, were the most affected: approximately nine million children of six or seven years of age entered the first grade and four million remained. Orealc, in the wake of these statement, also presented disturbing data:

> Of 16.5 million students in the first grade of Basic Education, some 7 million fail; of 12 million students of High School students, some 4 million fail, and of the 11 million Third Grade students, some 3 million fail. For the first six grades of Basic Education, the region spends US$ 3.5 billion per year on failing students[…] Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Jamaica, and Mexico suggest that half of the fourth-grade students do not understand what is spelled out for them, worsening the problems of failure (Regional Education Office to Latin America and the Caribbean, 1993, p. 4-5, our translation).

Thus, statistics revealed a necessary and urgent concern. What strikes us is the perspective of analysis of these figures always reinforced by the indication of the most affected subjects: children in the early grades of Basic Education and socially and economically

disadvantaged families in rural, urban-marginal, and indigenous communities. In all the Promedlacs, school failure was treated among statistics, always reiterating the same affected subjects, delimiting the challenge faced by Latin American and Caribbean nations, but never thinking over the urgency of rethinking poverty as a consequence of a model of exclusionary social structure.

In this flow, what was always signaled as an urgency to be solved gained qualifier outlines of inefficiency in the educational systems. After all, if the problem was not solved, it became evident that the few investments destined to Primary Education (around 50%) were being wasted. This situation was even more complicated at a time of crisis in Latin America and the Caribbean and the resulting decrease in public spending. Objectively speaking, the problem lay in the loss of subsidies, not in the losses experienced by the subjects.

> Annually, of the US$ 7.5 billion of public spending on Primary Education, US$ 2.5 billion (almost a third) is spent with students failing in Primary Education […] the human cost in terms of time lost and accumulation of frustrations can be even higher than the cost of caring of the failing students (Schiefelbein, 1995, p. 16, our translation).

The reiteration of the theme of failure (in its correlation with the waste of investments) cannot be considered unintentional, neutral, and impartial. In the Bulletins, the analysis perspective was always accompanied by notes on the economic crisis affecting the Latin American and Caribbean region, and on the consequences of this situation, as if it were marking a gloomy context with statements about lack of investments, foreign debt of the countries, and the need for economic adjustment policies. These policies, in turn, emerged explaining and justifying the cuts in public spending and the need for educational problems to be solved with the few resources available.

In this flow of statements, costly and uneconomical failure and "dropout" needed to be "eliminated" in order to achieve quality and efficiency in education (synonymous with low rates of failure and reduced loss of resources, respectively). Even the researcher Ferreiro (1987), a reference in literacy studies and one of the authors present in the Bulletins, affirmed failure as a costly solution. This rhetoric emphasized the need for efficiency in the reorganization of possible resources, recognizing that the lack of investments was also an evident cause for the increase in failure and dropout statistics.

In this dynamic, the statements about the best use of resources and the urgent need to increase investments were also coordinated with discussions about international and national mechanisms and institutions of cooperation that became increasingly present in the Bulletins. In Promedlac VI (1996), for example, the participating Ministers considered as imperative the search for financing with international partner agencies - WB, IADB, Organization of American States, among others - or with subregional and bilateral cooperation agencies. These institutions were recalled in the articles, showing how Unesco has led Latin American and Caribbean countries in the search for partnerships. Understanding the purposes of education for these organizations further endorsed our questions about the impartial self-image constructed by Unesco, since these same purposes are reinforced in the discourses of different authors co-participating in the Bulletin publications.

In general, from the beginning to the end of the CEP (1980-2000), basic education was demanded, understood as a fundamental prerequisite for the preparation of an economically active population and for the development and competition of countries. Basic Education would grant "human resources with a solid general training that allows thinking and delivering at the same time [...]" (Unesco/Orealc, 1992, p. 16, our translation). For Reimers (1990), another author present in the Bulletins, education played a central role for social mobility and material success of individuals, as it ensured the conditions for the country's competitiveness in the international market (skilled labor). This perspective was very close to the motivations of ECLAC assumed from Promedlac IV (1991), and was strengthened in the development of the CEP (1980-2000). Schiefelbein (1995) and Schiefelbein et al. (1994), in this same light, emphasized the need for training labor force that could compete internationally, which would improve equity and reduce poverty.

Schiefelbein et al. (1995), more specifically, stressed the urgency of educational transformations in the context of globalization (experienced in the 1990s), as new development models organized around international economic competence emerged. To increase the nations' scientific and technological potential, the quality of teaching and learning should be improved. Promedlac VI (1996) and the Kingston Recommendation (Education, Democracy, Peace and Development: Recommendation of Minedlac VII, 1996) reaffirmed these statements. Thus, the preparation needed to guarantee levels of international competition (the purpose of education) gains strength in the midst of criticism of school failure and traditional teaching methods, and

reveals us the educational horizon required by the partnerships: preparation of internationally competitive labor.

It is interesting to note that criticism of traditional teaching methods reverberated around the need for innovation in basic education and, consequently, in early childhood literacy (the bottleneck of failure). Curricular and methodological readjustment — a condition for the development of Latin American and Caribbean nations — could guarantee the preparation of a workforce consistent with the contexts of these 20 years. In this flow, literacy was initially demanded for the teaching of the fundamentals of reading and writing and, later, for the nurturing of subjects who could understand what they read and write with communicative efficiency. Although visibly different, these demands are based on one, and only one, perspective of literacy: that linked to the mastery of the code, codification and decoding of the written language.

Thus, the concern with the teaching of reading and writing skills became markedly present in discussions about school failure, to the point of even becoming the theme of a contest for "projects demonstrating pedagogical intervention in the problems of literacy and numeracy as factors of school failure" (Unesco/Orealc, 1990, p. 77, our translation). Always accompanied by reflections and sharing of experiences considered "successful," concerns with children's literacy unfolded into numerous proposals for projects and programs that maintained the learning of codes as a basic requirement, disconnected from the political dimension of literacy.

Examples of experiences that made this analysis possible can be identified in many Bulletins. In Nicaragua (Unesco/Orealc, 1986), the phonics-analytic-synthetic method was defined as the only strategy for learning to read and write, and for "eliminating" school failure and "dropout." In Jamaica (Unesco/Orealc, 1988) a project was developed to develop decoding skills, word recognition and reading comprehension. As we can see in both propositions, codification and decoding were enough. Literacy was understood as a technique to learn reading and writing skills, markedly associated with traditional teaching methods, and emptied of its critical and reflective dimension.

As time went by, criticism of traditional teaching methods, especially from the 1990s on, became stronger (since they did not guarantee the reduction of failure and dropout statistics) and found in Emilia Ferreiro's constructivist discussions the necessary scientific grounding. Believing in the relationship between failure in primary education and failure in children's

literacy, Ferreiro (1987, p. 8, our translation) stated: "the initial filter is found at the beginning of entry into the system (between 1/3 and 1/4 part of those who entered fail the first year)." In this sense, it would be impossible to think about the end of illiteracy without improving the quality of the literacy-building Primary Education (a subject reiterated in Bulletin No. 17), and unimaginable to achieve effective democracy without access to written language.

In parallel to constructivist critiques, statements about basic learning needs also gained prominence. The World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, 1990, defined reading and writing as one of these needs, but from a merely instrumental perspective. In Promedlac IV (1991), reading and writing, in addition to oral expression, calculation and problem-solving, were considered essential tools for learning and the very learning content. However, its reduction to a merely instrumentalizing technical action restricted to the coding and decoding of texts, reinforced the distancing of literacy from its critical dimension, as pointed out by Freire (1984).

In brief, even coordinated to a discourse that sought innovation in the teaching of reading and writing skills, the conception of language as a code continued to be reaffirmed, thus maintaining a worldview uncommitted to social transformations and the formation of critical subjects. These statements, emptied of political and ethical meaning and responsive to the disadvantaged classes, could guarantee pedagogical changes restricted to methodological and didactic aspects (less costly and simpler).

Even authors not directly linked to literacy studies made biased proposals due to this contradiction that admitted the need for changes, however limited to methodological aspects and maintaining theoretical grounds of the old methods of teaching reading and writing skills. The following excerpt exemplifies our consideration:

> aspects that should be considered in the design of the activities required to continue advancing towards the objectives of the CPE: […] improve the methods, structure, contents and procedures used by educational systems, since the increase in financial resources is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the achievement of the proposed objectives […] (Schiefelbein et al., 1989, p. 19, our translation).

Schiefelbein et al. (1989) reappear amidst these scores, pointing out, along with other authors, that improvements in methods and content were sufficient. And more: based on available resources (thus with no forecast for additional resources). This coordination between superficial improvements and scarce resources leads the statements that value low-cost

measures. In this sense, a series of articles produced by this author, with or without collaboration, were spaces for sharing "successful" experiences biased by this perspective. It is worth considering that "success" in this context was synonymous with the reduction of failure rates using little money. Automatic progression was an example shared as a strategy for dealing with school failure (Schiefelbein, 1988) and powered by different countries, including Brazil, with the *Ciclos de Alfabetização*.

Toward the end of the CEP (1980-2000), other statements approached the learning of the written language from another perspective, that of "learning how to learn," a new demand from the globalized world. This idea implied, among other issues, to develop in the subjects "the ability to take responsibility for the accomplishment of their personal project" (Delors, 1998, p. 16, our translation), within the new four pillars of education (learning to be, learning to do, learning to know, and learning to live together) recommended by the Delors Report (Delors, 1998) and required by the world globalization. Among the basic learning defined by the Cochabamba Declaration (2001), "the 'education pillars' appear balanced, both in their humanistic and techno-scientific dimensions" (Unesco/Orealc, 2001, p. 11).

Specifically regarding reading and writing skills, the ideology kept on advocating that training of skilled labor required learning the minimum skills (reading, writing and counting). However, in a context of technological advances, learning to learn took on new clothes and greater urgency, since it was necessary to train "people capable of evolving, adapting to a rapidly changing world, and capable of mastering these transformations" (Delors, 1998, p. 72, our translation). Thus, mastering transformations continued to require basic knowledge (reading and writing skills) fundamental to the development of nations, since there was a "consensus on the role of education as the key to economic success" (Schiefelbein, Wolff & Schiefelbein, 1999, p. 54, our translation).

However, low-cost propositions prevailed for these expected big changes. In this logic, not even teacher training (intensely approached in the last years of statements of the Core Project) was spared. Schiefelbein, Wolff & Schiefelbein (1999), in the same perspective of approaching school failure through an economic bias, concluded that the increase in teachers' salaries and traditional training programs should not be implemented because they are high-cost measures. Promoting interventions with moderate costs (teaching materials and pre-school

programs) and no costs (selecting the best teachers for the first year, for example) would be the priority.

It is in this nuance that the dialogues around school failure were consolidated: synonymous with the lack of efficiency of the systems (due to loss of investments) and the low quality of an education that did not nurture in a manner consistent with the demands of the moment, which required pedagogical transformations, evaluating costs amidst the lack of resources. In this context, and allowing the sewing of these threads through the Bulletins, Unesco appears allowing statements about the need for greater investments to "eliminate" the high rates of failure and "dropouts" to be accompanied by submissions to international organizations willing to collaborate with the education of the Latin American and Caribbean countries. Thus, the centrality assumed by school failure in the Bulletins tacitly drove indebted countries to seek these resources in funding with institutions that had, in their core, economic points of view, as well as conceptions of literacy that overvalued the dimension limited to learning codes, and disregarded its political dimension.

Final remarks

Thinking over on the ambivalence of the discourses of Unesco may seem a subject already reiterated and overly addressed. However, with regard to the treatment given to children's literacy throughout the CEP (1980-2000), it has emerged as a timely and relevant theme due to the fact that we have not located studies and research devoted to this interface at the time of elaboration of this study. To this end, we mapped in this text — which resulted from our comprehensive and responsive analyses of the Bulletins' texts, mediated by the Bakhtinian perspective — the considerations aimed at the teaching of reading and writing skills, problematizing how the supposed neutrality attributed to Unesco ensured a specific direction to these reflections: the reiteration of school failure in children in the early grades of Basic Education as a core problem of Latin American and Caribbean education by preventing the individual success of failed subjects and nations as a whole.

This point of view on school failure allowed us to problematize Unesco's actions, which publicize their intentions around the dissemination of a culture of peace through the establishment of an "intellectual and moral solidarity of humanity" (Unesco, 2021). Always linking its identity to a supposed neutrality, Unesco acts in search of consensus, exchange, and

multiplication of information. However, the Bulletins are subject to critical analysis regarding this supposed impartiality insofar as, in the context of the CEP (1980-2000), the Bulletins reaffirmed an insoluble problem that demanded high investments in parallel with the need to establish collaborative partnerships that included funding agencies.

Moreover, the apparent impartiality established based on the setup of the Bulletins and the authorial competence of their writings was elaborated concomitantly to the dissemination of certain literacy references that suppressed the critical dimension of learning to read and write, and overvalued an eminently instrumental action restricted to the encoding and decoding of language.

In this plot, we agree with Noma (2011, p. 106), when he states that Unesco acted as a "laboratory of ideas, of consensus generation and standard setting, acting as a central disseminating forum of educational principles and general guidelines for the Latin American and Caribbean region." This way, we restate our problematizations regarding the propaganda about the supposed neutrality of Unesco's actions, pointing to the need to evaluate the intentions of this organization for the maintenance of such identity.

The consensuses on the CEP (1980-2000), including its objectives, need to be understood in this context that links education and development, and in this authorial place, an international organization aligned to the interests of funding agencies. In this flow, our counter words (Bakhtin, 2006) affirm economic anchorages that aligned education to the training of the disadvantaged population for work (which allowed the market the prerogative to dictate the directions of educational reforms), and false foundations that linked (and still link) schooling and development, reminding us of critical enunciations about a hypothetical redeeming power of education and literacy (Graff, 1995) that connived with ideologically situated interests, therefore, partial and in no way neutral.

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