


## Conceptual debates on initial reading instruction and literacy

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### ABSTRACT

This text explores the concepts of literacy, literacy and literacy through a qualitative approach. The methodology used included bibliographic and documentary analysis to achieve the proposed objectives. The study sought to understand the conceptual differences between literacy, literacy and literacy, based on bibliographic reviews of works by Soares (2009, 2017a, 2017b, 2020), Kleiman (1995, 2005) and Tfouni (2002, 2018). In addition, the study proposed a debate on the approximation and opposition of these concepts in the official documents that guide educational policies for the teaching of reading and writing in Brazil, such as the National Curriculum Parameter of Portuguese Language (PCNs LP), the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), Decree No. 9,765 of 04/11/2019, which instituted the National Literacy Policy, and the Guiding Notebook of the National Literacy Policy (PNA). As a result, the terms literacy, literacy and literacy play important roles in educational practices, being found both in normative teaching documents and in continuing education activities for teachers (Pró-Letramento and PNAIC). It is worth mentioning that they are not teaching methods nor synonymous, as each one has its own specificity, although they are closely related. Thus, it is crucial that education professionals who plan pedagogical actions in the process of teaching reading and writing can clearly identify these terms.

**Keywords:** Reading and writing, Theoretical conception, Educational public policy, Brazilian reality.

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## INTRODUCTION

This research is an integral part of an investigative trajectory funded by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), with support from the Foundation for Research Support of the State of Amazonas (FAPEAM), focusing on the category of literacy study. Based on the reflection that different terms arise in school activities, and that they come from educational reforms, it is essential that these terms are understood by professionals, avoiding misunderstandings.

In this context, the objective of this work is to answer the following questions: how do Brazilian researchers who study the linguistic and sociocultural aspects of reading and writing use the concepts of literacy, literacy and literacy? Is it possible to understand these concepts from their linguistic definitions? And how do the documents that guide educational policies in Brazil contribute to making the concepts clear to basic education professionals?

Acknowledging the vast literature on the subject, this research has two main objectives: to understand the conceptual differences between literacy, literacy and literacy, through a bibliographic review of the research of Magda Soares, Angela Kleiman and Leda Tfouni that contribute to the training of literacy teachers in the country; and to promote a debate on the convergence and divergence of concepts in the current documents that guide the teaching of reading and writing in Brazil, such as the National Curriculum Parameter of Portuguese Language (PCNs LP), the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), Decree No. 9. 765 of 04/11/2019, which establishes the National Literacy Policy and the Guiding Booklet of the National Literacy Policy (PNA).

The research has a qualitative approach, because "[...] it is considered a dynamic and systematic procedure of targeted investigation, based on what is being investigated (Guilherme; Cheron, 2021, p. 100). The methodology is based on a bibliographic study that allows direct contact with the theme (Oliveira, 2007), and on the analysis of primary documents that did not receive analytical treatment from other authors (Helder, 2006).

In the bibliographic research, the theoretical studies of Magda Soares (2009, 2017a, 2017b, 2020); Angela Kleiman (1995, 2005) and Leda Tfouni (2002), as the authors discuss the conceptions of the terms literacy, literacy and literacy, based on anthropological, sociological, linguistic, cognitive, historical and cultural approaches, providing an understanding of the distinct concepts that reflect sociocultural relations, beyond school spaces, contributing to the training of teachers in the country.

Regarding the primary documents, an analysis was carried out of those that support the public educational policy in the country, including the National Curriculum Parameters (Portuguese Language), National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC), Decree No. 9. 765, of 04/11/2019, which establishes the National Literacy Policy, and the Guiding Notebook of the National Literacy Policy



(PNA). Through this study, we understand that the concepts of literacy, literacy and literacy are not identical, but are interdependent in formal teaching practices and in interactive and cultural learning actions in life in society.

## **LITERACY, LITERACY AND LITERACY: DISTINCT AND INTERDEPENDENT CONCEPTS**

Functional illiteracy represents one of the great challenges faced by the Brazilian population, preventing the ability to fully master reading and writing as a sociocultural and historical right. A fundamental right and a basic necessity for learning, universal literacy for children and adults is the indispensable condition for the full exercise of freedom (UNESCO, 2003).

The democratization of education, from the twentieth century onwards, is marked by the expansion of the culture of writing in the social, cultural, economic and political development of Brazil. And the visibility of reading and writing practices, in the social and professional fields, triggered the need to advance, even more, on the skills of reading and writing in a social context (Soares, 2009).

Schools have also undergone changes, as they began to face the consequences of school failure rates in literacy, thus there is a need to rethink teaching practices. Soon, literacy became a legitimate and necessary theme of studies and scientific investigation in Brazil, from the 1960s onwards (Soares; Maciel, 2000).

Elementary education came to be seen as a means of enabling the formation of a society, in which schooling promoted significant learning. And in order to achieve this learning, the teaching processes should contemplate social practices, considering the meaning of experiences outside the walls of schools.

Magda Soares (2017a, 2017b, 2020) addresses that the term literacy, as a writing practice, is the visual representation of the sound chain of speech, and emphasizes that it is the ability of "writing technology", together with learning the representation of the alphabetic, orthographic and psychomotor system. To this end, it is opportune to understand that literacy has several facets because it is complex and part of the linguistic sciences. Thus, Soares (2017a, p. 27) emphasizes that: "Literacy, in the current state of linguistic sciences, Cognitive Psychology, Developmental Psychology, is a complex process that involves several components, or facets, and demands different competencies."

By pointing out the main facets of written language learning, Soares (2017b) bases three, namely: linguistic, interactive and sociocultural. These insert the individual into the world of reading and are part of the methods and proposals for the conception of written language. The author discloses each facet in a theoretical and didactic way, enabling the understanding of the



interrelationship they maintain and the potentiality of the teaching work when considering them in didactics.

The linguistic facet of the written language is the most fundamental stage of the literacy process (Soares, 2017b). The author reinforces that, "at first, letters are, for the child, visual forms. He sees letters and learns to name letters in a process that is not fundamentally different from the acquisition of vocabulary in oral language" (Ibidem, p. 209-210, emphasis added).

In line with this conception, the learner of the written language must have the opportunity to learn the other facets of language interaction (interactive and sociocultural), which are present in daily life. The interactive facet of the written language is established "as a vehicle for interaction between people, for expression and understanding of messages [...] the object is the skills of comprehension and production of texts" (Soares, 2017b, p. 29). While the sociocultural facet, the learner is located around the "uses, functions and values attributed to writing in sociocultural contexts" (Ibidem).

Soares (2017b) points out that the three facets are distinct objects of knowledge when composing the process of initial learning of the written language and that they are related to different cognitive and linguistic domains. The interactive and sociolinguistic facets are linked to literacy practices, which implies the insertion of the individual in the "reading and production of real texts, of social practices of reading and writing" (Soares, 2020, p. 27).

Consequently, they are skills that need to be developed together in the literacy process. Thus, it is important to understand that learning is not established in isolation from the socio-cultural actions experienced by the learners, as Kleiman (2005, p. 5) reinforces: "When a child, a young person or an adult is taught to read and write, this learner is getting to know society's literacy practices".

The terms literacy and literacy are often discussed in scientific research and serve as a reference to the implementation and implementation of public policies, aimed at teacher training and the service of basic education students in Brazil. Some of the national reference documents are the National Curriculum Parameters (1997), Pro-Literacy (2008), National Pact for Literacy at the Right Age (2012), the National Textbook Program (PNLD) and the National Common Curriculum Base (2018).

In 2019, Decree No. 9,765 of 04/11/2019 was instituted in the country, which established the National Literacy Policy. Article 1 aims to "[...] to improve the quality of literacy in the national territory and to combat absolute illiteracy and functional illiteracy, within the scope of the different stages and modalities of basic education and non-formal education". This document established the pedagogical actions in favor of the conception of reading and writing, in terms of literacy and literacy, based on scientific evidence from the cognitive science of reading "which is especially



concerned with the linguistic, cognitive and cerebral processes involved in learning and teaching reading and writing skills [...]" (Brazil, 2019, p. 20).

Decree No. 9,765, of 04/11/2019, brings the concepts of literacy and literacy as appropriate references for the reformulation of the documents that guide the formative processes and teaching of reading and writing for students in different regions of the country. In addition, these terms are presented in the Guiding Notebook of the National Literacy Policy (PNA). It is worth noting that the term "literacy" is not mentioned in these official documents.

## DISCUSSING THE RESULTS

The concepts of literacy, literacy and literacy, present in the current National Literacy Policy (which abolished the term literacy) will be discussed with the mediation of some theorists and their foundations: Magda Soares (2009, 2017a, 2017b, 2020), Leda Tfouni (2002), Angela Kleiman (1995), as well as the passages of the teaching guiding documents that systematize the educational policy, in order to understand the distinctions, encounters and disagreements of terms, in a theoretical perspective on the conception of reading and written production.

The authors were selected due to their contributions to the processes of pedagogical training in the country, influencing the teaching practice and providing a theoretical basis for the political-pedagogical actions implemented over more than twenty years in the Brazilian context. His works were important for pedagogy courses, municipal and state curricula, academic productions, continuing education of teachers (such as Pró-letramento, PNAIC), and for scientific production and formulation of public policies related to literacy in Brazil.

The Portuguese Language Curriculum Parameter (1997) and the BNCC (2018) highlight, even with twenty-one years of distance between these documents, that literacy refers to the knowledge of the writing and reading techniques of the alphabetic system, while literacy encompasses the participation of individuals in a critical way in real social practices of reading and writing. The BNCC also introduces the concept of "multiliteracy", which involves the participation of students in different languages, including digital.

Literacy is defined by Leda Tfouni (2002) as the practice of writing and reading skills; therefore, writing and language practices, relating it to the individual scope. Literacy, on the other hand, focuses on the sociocultural aspects of the acquisition of writing in societies that adopt a writing system, in a restricted or generalized way. In short, the author also emphasizes that literacy is a broader process than literacy and, that it contains and determines it, "it is related to the existence and influence of a writing system, socially prevailing in a literate society" (Tfouni; Pear tree; Assolini, 2018, p. 17).



Similarly, Angela Kleiman (1995) conceptualizes literacy as a set of knowledge about the written code of the language, encompassing the acquisition of the first letters and orthography; the involvement of cognitive operational sequences and the child's physical-motor engagement. He defines literacy "as a set of social practices that use writing, as a symbolic system and as a technology, in specific contexts, for specific purposes" (p. 18-19), and concludes that literacy and literacy are inseparable.

In line with this statement, we confirm with the studies of Magda Soares (2017b), when considering literacy as the process that comprises the two facets of written language: interactive and sociocultural, as a vehicle for interaction between individuals in the most different forms, expressive and comprehensive values of messages. Considering that literacy and literacy are distinct processes, however, inseparable, Soares (2017a) asserts that:

Dissociating literacy and literacy is a mistake because, within the framework of the current psychological, linguistic and psycholinguistic conceptions of reading and writing, the entry of the child (and also of the illiterate adult) into the world of writing occurs simultaneously through these two processes: by the acquisition of the conventional writing system – literacy – and by the development of skills to use this system in reading and writing activities, in the social practices that involve written language – literacy (p. 44-45, emphasis added).

The author also advises that literacy practices outside of school translate relevance to social objectives for those who participate in the situation. In this sense, transposing these experiences to school spaces collaborates with the development of students' skills and competencies in learning the written language. It can also be inferred from Kleiman (2005, p. 6) that the "concept of literacy emerges as a way to explain the impact of writing in all spheres of activities and not only in school activities".

Analyzing the definitions of Soares (2017a, 2017b, 2020), Kleiman (2005) and Tfouni (2002), we observe that the processes are different, but there is an interdependence between the terms: literacy and literacy. While literacy refers to reading skills and the practice of writing associated with formal education, literacy is the engagement of individuals in real social practices of reading and writing production. In this sense, considering real practices of reading and writing production in school spaces collaborates significantly with the process of acquisition of reading and writing by learners.

The definitions of the terms literacy and literacy were also present in teacher training policies in the country. Pro-literacy and PNAIC stand out. In the formative guidance material for literacy teachers, the Pro-literacy Program (2008), emphasized that:

With the emergence of the terms literacy and functional literacy, many researchers began to prefer to distinguish literacy and literacy. They began to use the term literacy in its restricted sense, to designate the initial learning of reading and writing, of the nature and functioning of the writing system. They correspondingly began to reserve the terms literacy or, in some



cases, functional literacy to designate the uses (and the skills of use) of the written language (Brasil, 2008, p. 10).

As for the PNAIC (2015), the national policy for the training of literacy professionals, it had the position of stating that,

The conception adopted within the scope of the PNAIC is that of Literacy from the perspective of Literacy. In other words, it is understood and defended that it is necessary for the child to master the Alphabetic Writing System, but also to develop skills to make use of this system in various communicative situations, with autonomy (Brasil, 2015, p. 21).

Thus, it is inferred that the policies aimed at the concepts of literacy and literacy in the country, in a coherent way, prior to the PNA (Brasil, 2019b), expressed the concepts of the terms literacy and literacy as processes that should be part of teacher training and, consequently, of teachers' didactic actions in school spaces. This was without dissociating the conceptual assumptions that supported them for the formulation of school projects and activities that aimed to teach students to read and write.

Another term discussed is literacy, recurrent in the text of Decree No. 9,765, of 04/11/2019, and in the PNA Guiding Notebook (Brasil, 2019b), the conceptual similarity with the term literacy, widely disseminated in the country, is remarkable. Above all, the official document did not refer to the term literacy, but to literacy, considering:

I. literacy – teaching of reading and writing skills in an alphabetic system, so that the literate person becomes able to read and write words and texts with autonomy and comprehension;  
VII. literacy – set of practices and experiences related to reading and writing and its productive practice. (Brazil, 2019a, p. 50-51).

Through the foundations presented by the theorists throughout this text, the two items of the PNA present conceptual approximations between the terms literacy and literacy. Subjectively, it is analyzed that the Brazilian government policy chose to abolish the term literacy from widely disseminated educational projects, without considering all the knowledge historically produced by scientific research in the country and the diversity of political agendas of a formative nature of basic education professionals.

The documents cited aimed to promote literacy in Brazilian society, through "scientific evidence", based on the cognitive science of reading, as highlighted in the PNA Guiding Notebook (Brasil, 2019b), signed by Carlos Francisco de Paula Nadalin<sup>3</sup>, Secretary of Literacy<sup>1</sup>. The document highlighted the use of the term literacy in a scientifically terminological way, in order to align with other Portuguese-speaking countries that use the term literacy (in English) and *littératie* (in French), and presents as a justification for making the decision on the term: "the option to use it brings several

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<sup>3</sup> Secretary of Literacy in Brazil – Government of President Jair Messias Bolsonaro (2019-2023).





advantages, as it is a way of aligning with internationally consolidated scientific terminology" (Brasil, 2019b, p. 21).

The researchers referenced in this research define the term literacy in a similar way to the term literacy in their works, even before the launch of the National Literacy Policy. This demonstrates the concern of science in favor of literacy in the country. Magda Soares (2009) points out that the term literacy is a translation into Portuguese of the English term literacy, being defined as "the condition of being literate". Tfouni (2002) highlights the overlap between literacy and literacy, emphasizing the focus on practices, skills, and knowledge related to the encoding and decoding of written texts. Kleiman (1995) highlights "empowerment through literacy" as a watchword in literacy studies, indicating the potential it provides.

Thus, the definitions presented by the theorists throughout this text involve the process of systematic teaching of reading and writing and the conscious use of these skills in various individual and community interactions in the Brazilian context.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study provides us with an uncomplicated understanding of the terms literacy, literacy and literacy, thanks to the contributions of authors Soares, Tfouni and Kleiman. In general terms, these researchers explain that literacy refers to the consolidated acquisition of the visual representation of the sound chain of speech, that is, it is the ability to competently use the alphabetic system. On the other hand, literacy and literacy involve the interactive and sociocultural use of written language in various contexts, such as social, professional, scientific and political.

The authors also point out that the terms literacy and literacy have similar semantics. To reach this conclusion, they sought to understand the relationship between the term "literacy" present in the foreign vocabulary and the term literacy. Until 2018, the term literacy was widely used in the cultural practices of school contexts in Brazil. This is evidenced by the guiding documents for education, such as the National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs) and the National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC).

The concepts of literacy and literacy underpinned the political bases for teacher training in the country (Pró-Letramento and PNAIC), which preceded the PNA (2019). Therefore, the concepts addressed by Brazilian researchers helped in the organization of these training policies, with a view to eliminating illiteracy in Brazil.

With the national dissemination of the term literacy in the Brazilian educational system with the implementation of Decree No. 9,765 of 04/11/2019 and the guidelines of the PNA Guiding Notebook (Brasil, 2019b), other formulations raised on the conceptual bases in relation to the teaching of literacy were questioned. The objective of this policy was to "homogenize" the term in





the country, to align it with those used in other first world countries, such as the United States, England, France and Portugal. And this has paid attention to the erasure of the term literacy from the various political-pedagogical actions already established in Brazil.

Literacy does not end in concepts about its terms, it presents itself as a field of study of education, and must be understood in the most diversified approaches that contemplate teaching and learning for the acquisition of reading and written production. The concepts of literacy, literacy and literacy must be recognized and demystified, so that there are no doubts and/or confusion in the understanding of literacy policy and in the teaching work to promote teaching.



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