


**TELLING VERSES, TELLING STORIES: CONTRIBUTION OF CORDEL LITERATURE IN BASIC EDUCATION** <https://doi.org/10.56238/sevened2025.008-001>**Sidney da Silva Chaves<sup>1</sup> and Alba Maria Mendoza Cantero<sup>2</sup>.****ABSTRACT**

The classes taught in Basic Education, specifically, along with the Portuguese curricular component, need to consider cultural, social and also historical aspects about local experiences. At the same time, cordel literature, because it has a more popular circulation aspect, turns out to be a textual genre that is especially representative of regional culture, and is also interesting to work on notions focused on musicality, the valorization of different linguistic varieties and the exploration of different ways of working with grammatical notions and less erudite ways to settle, for example, spelling rules. Thus, this article has the main goal of examining the contributions that cordel literature can bring to the teaching of Portuguese language in basic education, considering its role in democratizing knowledge and its contribution to the valorization of local culture. In this way, with a bibliographic posture, it treats the analyzed data with a qualitative approach that excels in more recent studies that express an appreciation of the genre under investigation here. The results showed that the cordels have a playfulness inherent to their compositionality, contributing in a very significant way to the pedagogical actions committed in the Portuguese classes.

**Keywords:** Basic Education. Teaching. Cordel Literature. Portuguese language.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Brazil today, authentic pamphlets of cordel literature are still written and can be purchased with the same spirit and characteristics as those published in the Iberian Peninsula centuries ago. Although it is a remote and marginal genre, much more modern than in the past, and difficult to find in its purest forms (except in fairs, markets and specific establishments in certain northeastern cities), it continues to be a current and living phenomenon that arouses the interest of researchers, Basic Education teachers and associations that recover and republish the so-called "classics" of cordel (HAURÉLIO, 2018).

Vitality can also be seen in the very varied themes addressed by the Brazilian cordel and which are strikingly similar to those of the loose leaves that proliferated in Spain and Portugal. One of these themes is chivalry, those of various causes, added to licentious and political themes. On many occasions, they are unpublished stories that only adopt the clichés and general lines of popular books, but other times, to our great astonishment, we can come across very faithful versions of stories that trace their origin in medieval Europe, such as pamphlets that bring together the tradition of the Breton Cycle or the Carolingian Cycle (CURRAN, 1998).

A question arises at this point: *how did such medieval stories take root in the popular literature of the Northeast of Brazil after so many years, being widely used in schools?* As complex as this question may be, this study aims to obtain an answer to this driving questioner and, in the same vein, is concerned with examining the contributions that cordel literature can bring to the teaching of the Portuguese language in Basic Education, considering its democratizing role of knowledge and its contribution to the valorization of local culture. This is the general objective of this study.

Such an investigative effort is justified, because cordel literature is a canonically recognized textual genre, even though it comes from popular origins, and it is up to the institutions to insert such records in their school daily life to value the local culture and explore different matrices in the classrooms. Still, for Brito et al. (2023), in academia, "[...]Cordel Literature is little used. Teachers do not usually approach their content less conventionally" (p. 5).

Regarding the BNCC (National Common Curricular Base), it is observed that cordel literature is not presented expressively, but emphasizes the importance of excelling in cultural diversity and the appreciation of the artistic manifestations underway in Brazil, which encompasses works written in the format of cordel literature (BNCC, 2018). On this, it is worth reflecting that "[...] such contempt has certainly been an extraordinary obstacle

both to the formation of readers and to the construction of a more just, coherent and humane Brazilian society" (AZEVEDO, 2006, p. 4).

Furthermore, still circumscribing to the scope of teaching and based on Lacerda and Menezes Neto (2010), it is intended that cordel literature can be used to work with various curricular contents in a creative, playful and even interdisciplinary way, since the verses bring historical and social representatives that are of interest to curricular components such as History and Sociology. Therefore, through cordel leaflets, Basic Education students can have contact with a form of artistic expression of a marginal and popular order, since it addresses themes in their works such as culture, history, customs and social issues.

Brandão (1990) also mentions that "[...] the cordel pamphlet circulates not only among those who can read, but also among those who do not; and these, sometimes, even in greater number" (BRANDÃO, 1990, p. 30). Thus, the cordels contribute to expanding the cultural repertoire of students in Portuguese language classes, developing reading, interpretation and textual production skills.

Thus, this research, methodologically, is configured as a bibliographic research, analyzing qualitative data and based on the theories of Bardin (2011). To cut this out, more recent studies were prioritized, but other older records were necessary, given the historicity of this genre. That said, this article is organized into different sections. The first, *The playfulness of orality in Cordel Literature*, aims to associate the perception of playfulness with cordel writings to enable new pedagogical visions for this genre; the second, *A brief overview of cordel in Brazil*, aims to discuss historical aspects of the textual genre cordel literature to enable a greater thematic deepening; and the third, *Cordel Literature and Portuguese Language Teaching*, was concerned with relating the universe of Portuguese language teaching to literary writings in cordel to propose some alternatives to language teaching that value local and cultural aspects.

## THE PLAYFULNESS OF ORALITY IN CORDEL LITERATURE

In recent years, the importance of orality and voice for Portuguese-language texts written and printed during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, and even for many texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has become increasingly evident. The discovery of certain forms of composition closely related to oral tradition and the custom of reading texts aloud made it necessary to review many ideas about the invention, dissemination, fruition, and reception of various types of literature from these periods, which in light of these investigations acquire another dimension (BRITO et al, 2023).

Cordel literature is no exception. As our knowledge of the different types of texts printed on loose sheets advances, it becomes clearer that cordel literature is closely related to a type of culture in which orality plays a fundamental role, providing a playful portrait of Brazilian literature. The popular character of this literature, its textual material, the cordel role as its emblematic disseminator, its survival over more than four centuries, make it necessary to review many of its characteristics in the light of this relationship. Although many recent works on cordel literature have incorporated in isolation more or less detailed observations about its relationship with some elements of oral literature, none has so far taken on the task of making a clear delimitation of the phenomenon or the lines of study and problems that arise when approaching it. For Brito et al. (2023):

The production of cordels is a pedagogical strategy that requires low cost, involves playfulness, and stimulates creativity, allowing students to observe reality, making them reflect and question their actions, expressing their knowledge, emotion, and reason in prose and verse (BRITO et al., 2023, p. 4).

It is worth noting in the school field that the playfulness concerning the orality of Cordel Literature is materialized both in the form and in the content of the narratives. From a formal point of view, the rhyming verses and the characteristic metrics of the cordels create a cadenced and captivating rhythm, which holds the audience's attention and creates an atmosphere of enchantment. The cordel by Severino Milanês da Silva, born in 1906, known as *A greve dos bichos* illustrates well this playfulness very suitable for teaching:

Long before the Flood  
it was the world different,  
The animals all talked  
better than many people  
and spent a good life,  
working honestly.

The director of the Post Office  
it was Dr. Jaboty;  
The Coast Inspector  
it was the cunning Siry,  
that he had as a helper  
the trickster Quaty.

The rat was named  
for customs chief,  
making a lot of "moamba"  
making a lot of money,  
with Mouse Ordinance,  
sailor dress.

The Dog was a singer,  
liked serenade,

he was very girded,  
vest and tie,  
I spent the night on the street  
plus the Beetle and the Cockroach  
(Personal Archive, 1950)

In addition, the musicality of orality, as evidenced by Severino Milanês da Silva, can often be accompanied by instruments such as viola and zabumba, making an interdisciplinary approach with music teachers, contributes to the creation of a more relaxed, festive and joyful educational environment, which invites participation, learning and fun. From the point of view of content, the playfulness of texts such as Severino Milanês da Silva's is manifested in fantastic stories, such as the excerpt from *A greve dos bichos*, full of extraordinary characters, personified and unusual events. As evidenced, the plots of the cordels often involve elements of folklore, religions of African origins, about the culture of native peoples, mythology and popular culture, creating a playful, magical and imaginative universe that captivates the public and stimulates reflection on deeper and more universal issues.

Therefore, it becomes primal to raise some ideas about the relationship between cordel literature, playfulness and orality about language teaching. With this, it is necessary to describe the relationship that exists between the texts that are still printed on loose sheets and the types of orality that the local culture has. As Rufino (2017) asserts, "[...] Cordel is a methodology that facilitates the communication of the teaching and learning process, allowing the construction of knowledge" (p. 1). It is also imperative to have the textual implications of this relationship, that is, the marks of orality existing in the structure, composition and arrangement of the texts on the sheets of cordels.

In this way, it is necessary to say that the school does not need to deal with a specific literary genre within cordel literature, but to value loose sheets as an economic and practical means of dissemination to disseminate certain types of texts that fit its format and particularities (FONSECA; FONSECA, 2008).

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CORDEL IN BRAZIL

The simplest, and at the same time most comprehensive, definition that has been given to Brazilian cordel literature is perhaps to be a narrative, popular, printed poetry. It must be understood, then, that the cordel written by learned authors (a phenomenon that has become very widespread lately) is not such a pure manifestation, or in any case it is a "parafolklore" (CAMPELLO; SANTANA, 2019). It should also be noted that:

Cordel literature, in the most traditional sense [sic] refers only to the contacts of the man of the people with his fellow man. It is, [sic] a more recent progression, it can influence or be influenced by the media. It is in this sense that we can speak of a true revival of cordel literature in Brazil (LUYTEN, 2005, p. 10).

Cordel scholars think that an essential trait of poets must be to communicate the most intimate concerns of the people, and that for this they must belong to them, with marks of a stylistic illiteracy, or rather, a semi-illiteracy characteristic of the typical cordel author. Also to be considered is the oral poetry known as *repentismo* (so called because of the partially improvised character of the compositions), which includes songs and poetic challenges.

There is a very close connection between social challenges and pamphlets, not only because of versification and spontaneous and popular language, but also because many famous poetic battles were later collected in cordel by poets who attended the challenge (sometimes as participants) or who heard it later reproduced with greater or lesser fidelity. After the definition, which is undoubtedly very general, perhaps a physical description of the pamphlets is the most appropriate: if there is something that stands out fundamentally for the most authentic copies, it is their economy in resources. They are booklets of 8, 16, 24 or 32 pages (quantities obtained by folding the paper, as Martins (2020) points out), page size, sometimes typed and photocopied, and with a cover (or layer) of paper almost always in color that features a raw engraving (or woodcut) in black or a photograph related to the subject of the booklet. The following image shows this record:

Image 1. String cover



Source: Personal archive (2024).

These engravings, such as the cordel cover of Hamurabi Batista, a poet who participated in the movement of *the Maudito Poets* in Juazeiro do Norte-CE, are works of recurrent popular artists who always sign their writings, they are one of the aspects of the



cordel pamphlets that have attracted the most attention, to the point that some eminent art critic in the country has come to say that such woodcuts, represent the greatest contribution of the Northeast to the Brazilian visual arts. For these reasons, "[...] it is necessary to place reading as a scaffolding for an effective social reflection that leads the student to the formation and exercise of citizenship" (CONCEIÇÃO; GOES, 2016, p. 97)

Thanks to the exceptionally low printing price, astronomical print runs can be achieved, sometimes exceeding one million copies. In addition, poets publish an incredible number of works: 200, 500 or even a thousand pamphlets. Thus, it is estimated that between twenty and twenty-five thousand titles have already been published and, for Abreu (1999, p. 23) he believes, particularly, that it is "[...] correct to dissociate 'cordel' and 'popular', since both authors and the public of this literature do not belong exclusively to the popular strata". Therefore, these numbers are all astonishing (almost enigmatic) in a country where illiteracy prevails and where the press only reached it in 1808. All this is a good example of the enormous diffusion of the cordel and, in the same way, indicates that the authors, never anonymous, become popular in every way.

## CORDEL LITERATURE AND PORTUGUESE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Regarding cordel literature in Portuguese classes, Severo (2020), when addressing the application of this textual genre with historical data and characters at school, refers to the cordel writer Medeiros Braga. Among the various fronts that can be developed in Portuguese language classes, some make records available in strings that display information on national life and the universal context. It is up to the Portuguese teacher, in partnership with other professionals from other curricular components, to make these subjects known that are sometimes invisible, placing them in a positive evidence and an inspiring artistic reference.

Soon, the cordelistic works of Medeiros Braga, a poet born in Paraíba, produced several cordels on the history of well-known people, such as Mayakovsky, who was a revolutionary poet, the world-renowned Martin Luther King who was at the forefront of *apartheid* in the USA; on *The Cordel of the Roman Empire* and, also, with a theme focused on *The quilombo Manoel Congo: The saga of a warrior*.

Other references, more or less famous, can be inserted in the classroom, such as, i) *Leandro Gomes de Barros*, who was considered a kind of father of cordel literature in Brazil, being one of the most important cordel artists in the history of cordel in Brazil, as his works range from stories from the hinterland to social and political criticism; ii) *Patativa do Assaré*, one of the most popularly known Brazilian popular poets, since his works that

portray the life and culture of the people of the Northeast with an emphasis on themes such as drought, life in the countryside and the traditions of the Northeast; iii) *Aldemar Paiva*, a more contemporary cordel writer who in his works, addresses social and political themes, such as inequality, corruption and violence, marked by social criticism and political engagement, being a valuable source for the discussion of these themes in the classroom; and iv) the musical group *Cordel do Fogo Encantado*, which mixes popular music with cordel literature, addressing themes such as love, death and the search for freedom, being a rich source for the study of Brazilian poetry and popular music (ABREU, 1999).

This pedagogical effort aims to publicize literature that is being reinvigorated, making room for new initiatives, to the same extent that it deals with the new technologies available today. It is in this dilated set that the literary records in cordel have artifices to reinvigorate themselves and join the reading experiences of the new generations. Taking as a premise the colloquium established in the socio-historical and cultural field in which it was developed, the cordels can be inserted in the curricular proposals of Basic Education schools in a fluid way and imbibed with Portuguese classes. In the proposition mentioned above, the initiations could start from the productions of Medeiros Braga, Leandro Gomes de Barros, Patativa do Assaré, Aldemar Paiva and Cordel do Fogo Encantado, inserting projects and proposals for group or mediated reading to be carried out by students and teachers who make up the whole of the schools, fostering continuous and formative processes of children and adolescents to, then, they will be deployed to other cordel artists. To exemplify, the cover of a cordel by Medeiros Braga is presented.

**Image 2.** Cover of the leaflet "Cordel em cordel"



**Source:** Personal archive (2024).

Bringing contributions to teaching, only the cover of Medeiros Braga enables a range of possibilities for pedagogical actions with this type of literary record. Previous skills can be



explored, such as title analysis, interpretation of the woodcut, author's biography, social framing of the characters, the importance of the *Brazilian Academy of Cordel Literature* for society as a whole, among other actions. In addition, the following actions can be performed:

**Table 1.** Proposal to work with cordel in Portuguese, Literature and History classes

| EIXO DE ENSINO      | PASSO-A-PASSO   | MATERIAL DIDÁTICO  | OBSERVAÇÕES  |
|---------------------|---|--|--|
| - Leitura           | - Leitura de cordéis (Literatura).  | - Computador e cordéis digitais e impressos.   | - As leituras poderão ser indicadas pelo professor ou de livre escolha.          |
| - Oralidade         | - Análise oral dos cordéis com temas históricos (História).                       | - Computador e cordéis digitais e impressos.   | - O debate pode ser feito a partir das leituras de feitas.                       |
| - Produção de texto | - Produção de cordéis a partir da proposta de Medeiros Braga (Língua Portuguesa). | - Computador e cordéis digitais e impressos.<br>- Caderno e desenvolvimento de uma conta em rede social para publicação cordéis digitais (autorais e escolhidos) | - A tecnologia será utilizada para visibilizar os cordéis escolhidos e autorais. |

**Source:** Adapted from Araújo (2022).

Therefore, when dealing with this way of making literature in the student context, Lucena (2021) admits that, according to history, this textual genre was denied from schools and, consequently, not honored by society, with initiatives such as that of Araújo (2022) and the one outlined here to reverse this picture of discredit. For this author, the literary records in cordel were perceived:

[...] as the work of rude people, without mastery of the cultured norm of the language, cordel booklets were not considered classic works in the sense explained by Marisa Lajolo (1982, p. 23), that is, they were not worthy of entering classes, classrooms, because they were not considered suitable for student reading (LUCENA, 2021, p. 429).

Based on these perceptions, for this real importance to materialize in society, it is necessary to expand the actions of these readings in schools, taking care of prioritizing texts that sustain an intense bond with local and regional communities and that serve as a place of origin. To this end, to put a cordel representative of a given locality on the student dance is to have the competence to bring students closer and boost them in the artistic path and reading practices, having as ground zero the literary records in cordel. With this, local

and regional culture is kept alive among the youngest, encouraging creative processes in the making of new works in the form of leaflets.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed to examine the contributions that cordel literature can bring to the teaching of Portuguese language in basic education, considering its democratizing role of knowledge and its contribution to the valorization of local culture. With this in question, it was observed that the general characteristics of the Brazilian cordel, which proved to be very close to those of the European cordelistic literature, today almost extinct in territories outside Brazil. We also found that, in addition to the fact that cordel literature as a whole is a heritage of Europe, in today's Brazil there are still some elements that belong more directly to the tradition of the old continent and others assumed in Brazil as their own and particular characteristics.

Among these pamphlets some are the last links, more or less faithful, in a chain of literary transmission that finds its origins in the European Middle Ages, and even in the remote oral tradition. Some possibilities of insertion of this genre in Portuguese classes were presented, highlighting the possibilities of working in an interdisciplinary way.

Therefore, even without a specific mention in the BNCC (2018), cordel literature needs to be recognized as a pedagogical tool of great value to enrich the teaching and learning processes, promoting broad appreciation of Brazilian popular culture and contributing, finally, to the formation of students who are more critical, creative and aware of their cultural identity in the Brazilian context.

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