

THE INCREDIBLE WORLD OF BOOKS

EDUCATING READERS IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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READING IN BRAZIL

One recognizes the importance of reading, and parents would like their children to be readers. However, there seems to be unfair competition between books all of the electronic devices available to children and young people. And books end up taking second place ...

To give an idea, only, 50% of Brazilians are currently considered to be readers. This is a worrisome figure, since in 2007 it was 55%.

Moreover, there has been a decrease in the importance of mothers as major influences. In 2007, mothers were seen by children as their primary reference (49%). Currently, teachers fulfill this role (45%). In a former study, teachers were cited as the major influence by 33%, thus we see evidence of a notable growth of influence of the school environment. However, only 33% of students read in the classroom.¹

¹ The research *Retratos da Leitura no Brasil*, available at: <http://www.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,professor-influencia-habito-de-leitura-diz-pesquisa,908013,0.htm>
The study in its entirety may be found at:
<http://www.cultura.gov.br/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Retratos-da-leitura-no-Brasil.pdf>

THE TEACHER-READER

An important way to awaken interest in reading is to read to children in the classroom. Until the 3rd grade, students like to have a teacher read to them. Schools already perform this task, but the routine school numerous can make reading infrequent or reading periods shorter than is necessary.

In addition, a classroom teacher is not, and should not be seen as a teacher-reader (given that he or she teaches various subjects) as one who in the view of students seems to live for books and to whom they turn in order to talk about the purchase a book or to show interest in a particular story. Thus, the presence of the teacher-reader is a constant stimulus to explore the incredible world of books.

This teacher-reader is not a story teller in the theatrical sense of the term. Rather, he or she is an educator, with the goal of offering fundamental support to the classroom teacher in the search for an essential objective in this phase of life of students: to interpret correctly what is read and to develop vocabulary, spelling, and writing skills.

We could cite various parts of the Project Snipe Technical Manual that corroborate this initiative. Here we cite a key passage: "Reading shall be the major activity in this phase (...). It is important that upon finishing their first nine years of schooling, students will have acquired the habit of reading."

HOW IT WORKS

It is interesting that the teacher-reader works within the regular class schedule, giving one of the Portuguese lessons to the class each week, and not in extracurricular classes. This is due to the fact that the student, and primarily the family should understand the school's effort to foster the habit of reading.

As has been seen, up to the 3rd grade (eight years of age), we have found that it is most productive to read to children. Then, beginning in the 4th grade (nine years of age), the “Reading Circle” plays a very important role: each child with his or her, reads a part of the story. In less than six months it is already possible to note that students write better, increase their vocabularies and, as the result of the reading sessions, begin to utilize punctuation with more precision.

The gains for children in the capacity to imagine are marvelous and incalculable.

Moreover, since the teacher-reader does not use the usual assessment methods, he or she can concentrate wholly on the experience of reading. We once again cite the Technical Manual that traces this path:

One should not confuse reading comprehension with memory retention of more or less significant data. With reading, the concern will be to discover the main idea, the subject. We will identify the major characters and their characteristics, what messages or points of view the author presents, when facts occur and where, in what environments, what are the culminating moments, etc. In the end, one should be teaching the students to think.

THE TEACHER-READER IN SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLS

Nowadays, there are no longer doubts about learning differences between boys and girls in regard to language. To cite just one study, Simon Baron Cohen states:

Their sentences generally are longer, their speech tends to follow a standard of grammatical construction and has more correct pronunciation. Females also have the ability to

articulate words, and they do so more rapidly than males. Females also remember words better. The majority of males are more subject to pauses. And in clinical terms, males are at least twice as likely to suffer from language disturbances such as stuttering.²

We note a classroom activity that illustrates how this female precocity, compared to boys, can affect the performances of both. In the classroom, a story was read about “Greek myths”³. After the reading, a rapid dictation was carried out in which the teacher wrote a word on the blackboard, with the students seeing it very briefly, after which it was erased. Then, the students write the word on a previously prepared sheet of paper.

When we didn’t have single-sex classes, the girls wrote the word correctly, on the average, twice as often as the boys, with the lowest grade of the girls being equal to the boy with the best grade. Complaints such as “I’m not good at writing” were often heard by the teacher, who attempted to encourage the boys in their writing, evidently with little success, since the low level of their performance was obvious.

After the establishment of single-sex classes, we noted that boys improved their performance for a simple reason: they were no longer surrounded by, let us say, “unfair competition”. Without girls present, certainly a boy would be the best in the group, and since it was one of them who was the best, the male sense of competition increased.

This factor of male competitiveness can be well-utilized in the classroom. According to María Calvo Charro:

It is necessary to exploit the natural competitiveness of boys in order to foster academic achievement. Rather they fruitlessly attempt to eliminate competition as a natural masculine trait, we should attempt to guide it into educationally

² Simon Baron Cohen, 2004. “Diferença Essencial” Editora Objetiva, p. 75.

³ Eric A. Kimmel, 2010. “Mitos Gregos” Editora Martins Fontes.

productive channels. This involves converting typical male “combativeness” into healthy and effective competition.¹

In this sense, the competition of questions and answers is an effective tool for maintaining the attention of boys during reading sessions. At the Nautus School, we carried out the following activity with the book “The Bad Beginning”.

A SUCCESSFUL EXPERIMENT

Boys in the 5th grade (10 years old) participated in the Reading Circle, in which each student reads a part of the text, and at the sign of the teacher, another student continues at the point where the other left off. This technique is described in the book *Great Classes*² and was successful in our classes. If the students know beforehand what page they will read, their attention wanders, since they know where they will be asked to begin.

After four reading classes, a competition was held. The teacher wrote the questions on a piece of paper. The students were required to respond individually to questions after picking them from a box. Each correct response represented a point for the team. In this case, the prize was candy for the winning team, and one candy for each student on the losing team as a consolation prize.

It was not necessary to use this expedient for the classroom of girls. Interest was constant throughout reading of the book. The girls sought to read as best as possible. During the classes, the teacher noted the importance of the, as it were, pre-reading; a short chat generally not related to the theme, in order

¹ María Calvo Charro, 2009. “Guía para una educación diferenciada” Toromítico, p. 66.

² DouL Lemonov, 2011. “Aula nota 10 – 49 técnicas para ser um professor campeão” Editora Da boa prosa.

to begin the reading with the class enthused and prepared to do what was asked of them. In a 50 minute class, they were “five minutes to gain 45”. It seems to be a simple thing, but in a classroom with boys, in general, the teacher uses this time to calm them down.

This time with the girls was one for gaining trust, given that they are predominantly empathetic, which is, according to Cohen, “an emotional reaction caused by the emotions of others, seeking to understand them, to predict their behavior and to establish an emotional connection.”

In a reading class, which in principle may seem boring to students, it is extremely important to keep in mind that girls should like the teacher, while boys should, above all, respect the teacher. “The interpersonal relations of boys, in contrast to girls, are based upon a clear hierarchical structure in which status is everything. At the top of this hierarchy should stand the teacher”.³

For many Brazilian educators, this phrase may sound a bit aggressive. However, this is not a case of domination, but rather the first step in winning the hearts of boys. The teacher, especially if acting as a tutor, needs this respect, coming first all from professional competence, but based on the certainty that the teacher is the higher authority, and not the less disciplined student.

One of the things that we have tried to do in our classes is to make reading enjoyable and the least “academic” as possible. In other words, we do not apply tests, and the interpretive material is not outwardly didactic, but rather attempts to encourage intelligent questions for interpreting the literary work. No reader, except for the few with the required temperament, likes to memorize passages, happenings, dates, etc.

Of course, it is always necessary to ascertain that the students are indeed understanding the thread of the narrative. However, if the group is not a large one, this can be veri-

³ Op. cit., p. 106.

fied orally. In addition, one should note the importance of keeping a list of works read. In 2013, the more “technical” phase of this activity will begin. For each work read, the student will prepare a brief summary in his or her Portuguese notebook. After the reading, which will be individual, the students will have a test on the work. The test will not be only to discover if the student did indeed read the work, but rather if he or she achieved the goals of the classes: to be able to reflect on the book’s characters, if their actions were good or bad, etc.

Something similar, on an experimental basis, was done this year. After reading “The Fantastic Mr. Fox” by Roald Dahl, the student answered the question of whether the fact that Mr. Fox stole food from the house of the farmers was right or wrong. The two most common answers were:

- right, because he wanted to feed his family;
- wrong, because stealing is wrong.

In this case, since we are talking about 2nd grade students (7 years of age), the responses surprised the teacher, who had to make an intellectual effort to react to the answers in terms of ethics. After all, is it right to rob in order to feed the family? Brazilian law, at least, does not usually punish these kinds of infractions. According to Aristotle, cases of extreme necessity do not involve conscious acts; therefore there is no blame. But it wasn’t necessary to resort to the Greek philosopher; it was enough to say that Mr. Fox was not hungry. Moreover, he was a fox, and not a person. Foxes are hunters.

We have entered into details here in order to call attention to the fact that children are able to reflect about ethical quandaries and to respond, at times, in disconcerting ways.

A SUCCESS AND A FAILURE

On May 09, 2012, I gave a class for the 2nd grade (students between 6 and 7 years of age). On the prior Saturday, *O Estadinho*, the children's supplement of the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, had published an article about soccer goal keepers. When we read the article, we were enthusiastic: it would be good class material for the week. But would girls like it? We then gave the same class to boys and to girls.

The first class was with the boys. They loved the subject, and after watching a video showing goal keepers making great saves and great mistakes, they began to imitate their idols. Moreover, the objective of the class was attained: besides reading the article, they produced a small text. Success!

Then it was time for the girls. As soon as the article was distributed came reactions such as "Soccer? What a bore"; "Why are you giving us this?" We insisted that it was interesting. While they read the article, the girls talked among themselves, and paid attention to it only with difficulty. Even when pictures of great goal defenses were shown. We went to the video room. The comment in regard to the great defenses was: "Oh, how they sweat! How awful"; "Is it over?" We decided to show the video of goal keeper errors⁴. First, I asked, "Does anyone know what a *frango* is? Answer: "a kind of chicken?" Finally, because the girls of this classroom are adorable, we did get some of them to write something. But many did not. Failure ...

SAME STORY, TWO APPROACHES

A very productive activity was carried out with a 5th grade class (10 years of age). After a reading of the story "Perseus

⁴ In Brazil, the popular slang term for such an error is a "frango", which means *cockerel*.

and the Medusa” we suggested that the students write about the childhood and adolescence of the Medusa, since the story starts from the fact of his being a monster and makes no reference to his life previous to the curse (suggestion 1). Another writing option was for them to compose a story in which the mortal receives divine aid to defeat a monster, as with Perseus (suggestion 2).

All of the girls chose suggestion 1, which is more biographical. Of the ten boys, 9 chose suggestion 2, in which the objective is portraying a hero. One of the stories of the boys was entitled “Jack Defeats the Gigantic Dwarf “. Summarizing, Jack is an adult on a sunny day in Rio de Janeiro. Suddenly, a green being appears. Jack confronts it and when he is about to be defeated, he is stricken by a ray and gains super powers, a sword and a shield (this isn’t narrated in the story, but these are what Perseus received from Hermes and Athena). At the end, Jack ran up to the monster and pierced it with his sword. The monster fell on the ground and died. Then, the mayor gave him a medal and an iPad. Jack took the prizes and went in search of monsters.

The story received the maximum grade, since it had no spelling mistakes, was creative, used paragraphs, and went beyond the minimum of the requested 12 lines.

Another very well-fashioned story was presented by a girl. The title was “The Life of the Medusa Without the Curse”. In the story, the girl wrote that the Medusa was a 17 year-old girl who had an amulet, half of which was the figure of Aphrodite and the other of Athena. The latter meets a young girl and says that she hasn’t yet transformed her into a monster because the young girl had her image was on the amulet. But the young girl was proud of her beauty and said that she didn’t need the amulet to be beautiful. Athena said:

This is the first time that you have not worn the amulet.
Therefore, you will become a monster with hair of snakes.

And when people look you in the eye they will be turned into stone, and I shall be the most beautiful.

This activity demonstrated in practice that there are no intellectual differences between boys and girls. Both are able to take advantage of and develop the same activity in a brilliant manner. The story can even be the same one. What changes, in fact, is the focus - that which draws their attention and provokes the interest of both sexes. In our experiment, the boys were interested in heroism, with the strong emotions that the story presented. The girls were interested in the human drama of the Medusa, in the consequences of vanity in the lives of the characters.

At times, primary school teachers have a certain difficulty in accepting masculine stories in which the characters take up arms, fight with one another, and one encounters chain saws, machine guns, and blood is shed. From the moral perspective, one may state that there is no problem if in the end the objective is for the good. From the academic point of view, some may be concerned that readings of this kind may reinforce the masculine stereotype. As María Calvo Charro explains, letting boys be exposed to readings adapted to their masculine tastes (...) does not necessarily mean reinforcing stereotypes; on the contrary. It allows develop in boys a taste for literature and for letters in general, so that as they mature, they will open up to a broader literary universe that include poetry, human relations, profound personalities, and the infinite world of feelings.⁵

AN INCREDIBLE WORK

We cannot end these thoughts without referring to a work that has enchanted the children of the Nautus School: “The

⁵ Op. cit., p. 48.

Witches” by Roald Dahl. Enthusiasm for this work was enormous, both in the 3rd and 4th grades. Suffice it to say that the book has 180 pages and no illustrations. The teacher-reader had as a goal to read some selections, but the children asked for more and more.

After three months of weekly reading, they asked if there wasn't a continuation of *The Witches*. In addition, in each class the teacher a students to indicate at which part they had stopped reading the week before. They always knew. At one point, some questions were developed in order to ascertain the students' comprehension of the work. All of the students attained a percentage of above 70%.

This project demonstrated to us that there is no magic formula for attracting children to the fantastic world of books. In truth, there is only one: a good story.

