

THE GLOBAL CIRCULATION OF LITERACY POLICY: PHONICS, INEQUALITY AND NEO-CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

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One of the first acts of the neoconservative Brazilian government of Jair Bolsonaro, in 2019, was the creation of a secretariat of literacy education, headed by Carlos Nadalim, a Youtuber, home-schooling advocate and online bookseller. Nadalim swiftly introduced a new National Literacy Policy (BRASIL,2019) that prioritised “phonics”, short-hand for approaches to teaching reading and writing that focus on sounding-out words, thereby associating phonemes with their corresponding graphemes, sometimes contrasted with meaning-focused “whole word” approaches. While these two approaches are generally used together, Nadalim is not only a vocal supporter of phonics, but a vehement opponent of all other approaches to literacy, explicitly, those associated with Paulo Freire (1921-1997) and, implicitly, those emerging from New Literacy Studies. The push for phonics in Brazil “repeats” political moves and discourses mobilised in multiple national settings over the past 30 years, beginning in the USA in the 1990s, when there was a “direct political involvement in methods of literacy teaching” supported by “a conservative coalition of legislators, foundations, fundamentalist Christians, and their allied academics” (COLLINS and BLOT, 2013). Discourses of phonics advocacy include old and fallacious arguments that there is a crisis in literacy education, that other methods of instruction ignore phonics, and that phonics is the only way to effectively teach literacy (ALLINGTON, 1997). We believe that arguments around phonics can only be understood with regard for the social uses of literacy and the social relations established and projected in literacy education (COLLINS and BLOT, 2013). Exclusion of the social dimensions of literacy implies, as Apple (2001, p. 409) observes, that “popular knowledge, knowledge that is connected to and organised around the lives of the most disadvantaged members of our communities, is not legitimate”. In this paper, therefore, we seek to situate the rise of phonics in Brazil in relation to local and transnational political forces and with particular concern for the implications for educational inequalities. Much recent research in education policy shares, in common with globalisation theory in general, the idea of expansion of neoliberal and neoconservative policies through a process of replication in the periphery of dynamics identified in the global centre (CONNELL, 2007). While these are profitable avenues of analysis, it is important to remember that all repetitions or iterations produce new meanings, an insight from the philosophy of language (DERRIDA, 1988) that we seek to carry forth here. To do so we examine disputes over textual modifications to the governmental decree introducing the Brazilian National Literacy Policy (BRASIL, 2019) and

the narration of these shifting framings in the media, central to a wider dispute for power within the Ministry of Education and between various other policy actors (such as state and local governments). Although some policy analysts are at pains to point out that the meanings of policy are constructed locally, through their enactment, (BALL ET AL., 2011), socio-semiotic dimensions have been largely ignored. Treating phonics policy advocacy (PPA) as text, it is possible to consider the movement from one context to another as involving resignification through “entextualisation” (BAUMAN ET AL., 2003; BLOMMAERT, 2005). Entextualisation refers to the socio-semiotic processes of reframing and narrating texts, they are inserted into a new context and connected to broader discourses, historically sedimented semiotic repertoires, and distinctive social relations (SILVERSTEIN and URBAN, 1996). Who has the authority to undertake such reframings and narrations is central to the meanings and effects produced by entextualisation. As Silverstein and Urban observe, “entextualization both reflects and constitutes asymmetrical social relations” (SILVERSTEIN and URBAN, 1996). Considered in this light, initial entextualisations of phonics in US educational debates have undergone decontextualization through global circulation, and recontextualization in the neo-conservative politics of Brazil. This circulation inevitably reflects, and produces, difference, including in the (re)production of inequalities.

Palavras-chave: globalization; education policy; neoconservatism; phonics.

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