

## MATERIALITY OF A SUITABLE LITERACY ENVIRONMENT: an analysis of pedagogical discourses (1930-1990)

A materialidade do ambiente adequado à alfabetização:  
uma análise dos discursos pedagógicos (1930-1990)

La materialidad del ambiente adecuado a la alfabetización:  
un análisis de los discursos pedagógicos (1930-1990)

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the recommendations regarding a suitable school environment for childhood literacy contained in books directed at teachers published in Brazil between 1930 and 1990. In this period, such texts are transitioning from the predominant Escolanovista (New Education) ideology to a Constructivist perspective. This change manifests itself in how educators discuss the school environment organization and its importance for literacy learning: if, at first, their greatest concern was with creating a healthy environment, later it became organizing a pedagogical environment. On the other hand, these recommendations remained based on child psychology.

**Keywords:** history of education; school culture; teacher education.

**Resumo:** O artigo caracteriza as recomendações acerca do ambiente escolar adequado à alfabetização das crianças, contidas em livros destinados aos professores e publicados no Brasil entre 1930 e 1990. Nesse período, observa-se a transição do predomínio do ideário escolanovista ao dos preceitos do construtivismo nesses textos. Essa mudança se manifesta nos modos de pensar a organização do ambiente escolar e a sua importância no aprendizado das letras: se no primeiro momento, a preocupação maior era com a criação de um ambiente sadio, posteriormente, passou a ser com a organização de um ambiente pedagógico. Por outro lado, permaneceu a tendência a fundamentar as recomendações na psicologia da criança.

**Palavras-chave:** história da educação; cultura escolar; formação docente.

**Resumen:** El artículo caracteriza las recomendaciones sobre el ambiente escolar adecuado a la alfabetización de los niños, contenidas en libros destinados a los profesores y publicados en Brasil entre 1930 y 1990. En ese periodo se puede observar la transición del predominio del ideario escolanovista a los preceptos del constructivismo en esos textos. Ese cambio se manifiesta en los modos de pensar sobre la organización del ambiente escolar y sobre su importancia en el aprendizaje de las letras: si en un primer momento, la preocupación mayor era con la creación de un ambiente sano, posteriormente, pasó a ser con la organización de un ambiente pedagógico. Por otro lado, permaneció la tendencia a fundamentar las recomendaciones en la psicología de los niños.

**Palabras clave:** historia de la educación; cultura escolar; formación de profesores.

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## INTRODUCTION

Studies on human development often center considerations on biological and environmental factors and how they interact, usually expressed as *nature x nurture*. While the first decades of the 20th century focused on the biological, research in the 1930s turned to the environmental factor, seeking to understand what would constitute a suitable or harmful environment for child education. Produced in the scope of medicine, developmental and educational psychology, this knowledge has been incorporated into other areas, including pedagogy. This article examines the considerations about environmental influence on learning and the recommendations for organizing the school environment and materials made by experts who wrote books on literacy directed to teachers between the 1930s and the 1990s.

“Literacy environment” is a relatively recent term in the literature on literacy consulted, appearing only in 1991. In fact, it is only in the 1990s that the expression appears in pedagogical discourses, including official texts published by the Ministry of Education (MEC), accompanied by recommendations on its preparation to be followed by teachers who work with child literacy (Leme & Lima, 2021).

However, statements on the suitability of the environment for literacy learning can be found among the recommendations of experts in books published between the 1930s and 1980s. Which shows that the association between environmental conditions and literacy is not a recent theme in pedagogy, nor can it be said that the concern with its organization corresponds to the emergence of a specific literacy theory or conception. This is because both the *Escolanovista* (New Education) ideology and Constructivism, despite their differences in teaching methodology and understanding child development, recommend that literacy should be based on developmental psychology and formulate specific recommendations about the environment in which learning takes place, including its organization and the preparation of materials, which should be the teacher’s object of attention.

Studies in history of education also show that the relationship between the environment and formal child learning is not recent and is not restricted to literacy, but has been discussed by specialists from several areas: medicine, psychology, education, etc., since the first decades of the 20th century, gaining traction by the end of the 1930s (Stephanou, 2006; Lima, & Cazetta, 2022).

By analyzing seven books published between 1930 and 1990, this article examines how the pedagogical discourses on literacy learning historically formulated recommendations regarding school environment organization. Characterized by establishing a strong association between child education and national progress, these discourses firmly defended that teaching practices should be scientifically based on child psychology.

In light of Michel Foucault's (2012) perspective on discourse analysis, we understand that both the new education and constructivist perspectives configure two distinct discourses. In other words: two ways of stating the truth about childhood and literacy and, as we will see, different ways of conceiving the role of the environment in child learning and of making recommendations for its organization, although with common aspects between them.

In the 1920s, the New Education Movement spread in Brazil and resulted in the publication of the *Manifesto dos pioneiros da educação nova* [Manifesto from the Pioneers of New Education] (1932), written by Fernando de Azevedo (Boto, 2022). In this document, addressed to both population and the government, 26 intellectuals called for a public, obligatory, free, secular education, without distinction of gender, and provided by the State. They advocated the democratization of educational opportunities, establishing that school progression should occur not according to class privilege, but on biological abilities as criteria. At the same time, they understood that the contents, teaching practices and school spaces should be scientifically planned, that is, they should be adapted to the child's psychology (Azevedo et al., 2010).

Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, the discourse conditioning the literacy learning to "how the teacher should teach was challenged, and the question became how children learned literacy." Since then, answers to this question have been sought in Jean Piaget's studies on intelligence development and in the works of researcher Emilia Ferreiro (1991), under his advisement, on the *A psicogênese da língua escrita* [Psychogenesis of written language], commonly known as "constructivism."

This new discursive elaboration sought to solve a long-standing problem: the failure to learn literacy. In short, constructivist thinking disseminated the idea that children construct hypotheses about reading and writing even before entering school, and their knowledge about the alphabetic system advances from subsequent hypotheses in a certain order. For Mortatti (2019), constructivism represented a "conceptual revolution" because it modified our understanding about the child and learning.

When one thinks of the relations between the new education discourse and the constructivist discourse, however, it can perhaps be said that constructivism represented a step forward towards the conviction that teaching should be adapted to the student's psychology. We went from a discourse that, based on child development theory, focused on showing how teachers should teach to a discourse more centered on describing the stages of literacy learning, with suggestions of how the teacher could act to favor this learning. From this perspective, the teacher's work consisted largely in preparing the classroom environment to favor children's contact with letters, reading and writing, hence the expression "literacy environment."

Among the books analyzed, the following are examples of the New Education discourse: *Testes ABC para verificação da maturidade necessária à aprendizagem da*

*leitura e da escrita*<sup>1</sup> [ABC tests to verify the maturity needed for literacy learning] (Lourenço Filho, 2008); *Práticas escolares: de acordo com o programa de prática do ensino do curso normal e com a orientação do ensino primário*<sup>2</sup> [School practices: according to the preparatory course teaching practice program and elementary school guidelines] (D'Ávila, 1965); *A escrita na escola primária*<sup>3</sup> [Writing in Primary School] (Marques, 1950); *Leitura na escola primária: guia para normalistas e professores de curso primário* [Reading in Primary School: A Guide for Primary School Teachers] (Silveira, 1966)<sup>4</sup>; and *Ensinando à criança: guia para o professor primário*<sup>5</sup> [Teaching Children: a Guide for Primary School Teachers] (Marcozzi, Dornelles, & Rêgo, 1970). Aligned with the constructivist ideology, the following works stand out: *Alfabetização natural* [Natural Literacy Learning] (Rizzo, 1988); and *Construindo a alfabetização* [Developing Literacy] (Biscolla, 1991).

We seek to understand how the discourses elaborated by educators adopt developmental psychology theory to guide teaching regarding the physical materiality and affective conditions of the suitable or inadequate literacy environment. Based on the Foucauldian perspective on discourse analysis, our goal is to analyze the things said as they appear and connect to others in the writings, without establishing meanings unstated by their authors. To present the complexity of the discourse itself, we identify and describe the variations, repetitions, and transformations present in the selected books, thus contributing to the history of school culture regarding literacy and the methodologies for teaching child literacy presented by these statements. We thus share Frago's understanding that

By structuring or modifying the relations between what belongs inside and outside the school environment—the borders separating inside and outside—, or its internal space—by opening or closing, by arranging separations and limits, relationships and communications, people and objects in one way or another, we are modifying the nature of the place. We are changing not only the boundaries, the people or the objects, but the place itself (Frago, 1995, p. 71).

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1 Work published in 1933. This analysis adopted its 13th edition – Brasília: Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira, 2008.

2 Its 1st volume was published in 1940. The 2nd (1944) and 3rd (1954) volume were published as a supplementary volume. Both supplementary volumes were incorporated into the first volume by the 8th edition (Mortatti, 2019). This investigation adopted the 10th edition of the 1st volume (1965) which, like the others, was organized by Editora Saraiva.

3 First published in 1936, and reissued in 1950, the work makes up the collection 'Bibliotheca de Educação' [Library of Education], organized by Lourenço Filho.

4 The book was published in 1959 by the Brazilian Center for Educational Research of the National Institute of Pedagogical Studies (INEP) and was part of a series of textbooks for Primary School. Our analysis adopted the 3rd edition (1966), published by Editora Conquista.

5 This analysis considers a copy of the 1970 2nd edition, published by Ao Livro Técnico S.A., of the material originally published in 1965.

Besides this introduction, this article comprises four sections: the first presents the ways in which experts conceptualize the child and how children should learn literacy, based on the new education and constructivist perspectives. We then highlight some statements related to the school's and classroom's physical environment, such as characteristics of the school building, arrangement of classroom furniture and materials. The third section describes the statements regarding the affective aspects that help configure the school environment, in which relations are established between children and the teacher, as well as between students, and also between the teachers, the students, and their families. In the final considerations, we highlight the approximations and differences between the analyzed discourses, as well as their effects.

## **TWO WAYS OF STATING TRUTHS ABOUT CHILDREN AND LITERACY IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: THE NEW EDUCATION AND CONSTRUCTIVIST DISCOURSES**

Lourenço Filho's *Testes ABC para verificação da maturidade necessária à aprendizagem da leitura e da escrita* (2008), an exponent of the new education movement, presented the ABC tests as a resource that would save teachers and students time and energy in addressing the high repetition rates in São Paulo's elementary school in the early 1930s. According to the renowned educator, the ABC tests would allow teachers to get to know their students from a psychology perspective, and students would be given the opportunity to develop literacy according to their abilities.

By grounding his work on experimental psychology, Lourenço Filho offered teachers the possibility of classifying children according to maturity level, which would allow predicting the time it would take for children to learn literacy. More mature students would be able to learn literacy in one semester; partially mature students in one school year, whereas immature students would require special monitoring to reach maturity—considered a requirement for learning. By grouping students into more homogeneous classes regarding this criterion, he sought to increase school performance.

For the educator, this would be a condition for creating a more suitable environment for teaching and learning, as it would allow teachers to adapt their demands to the students' possibilities. Thus, more immature students would not feel discouraged when faced with difficulties beyond their strength, and the more mature ones would not feel disinterested when faced with tasks too easy for them. By proposing the ABC tests as an instrument for evaluating students' capacity to learn literacy, Lourenço Filho challenged the principle established by law that classes

should be organized by age group, arguing that chronological age did not correspond to a scientific measure capable of supporting school organization, as were psychological tests.

In *Práticas escolares: de acordo com o programa de prática do ensino do curso normal e com a orientação do ensino primário* (1965), the educator Antônio D'Ávila recognized new education as the basis of modern education and pedagogical practices that should underpin the work of primary school teachers in São Paulo. D'Ávila argued that teaching should be adapted to children's psychology and their literacy needs, which would be identified through tests, among which Lourenço Filho's ABC.

However, enrollment in primary schools followed chronological age and the ABC tests were optional. Children started first grade (intended for literacy learning) at the age of seven, which hindered following Lourenço Filho's recommendations to the letter. Nonetheless, sorting classes by strong, average, and weak students could take place based on the teachers' observations (D'Ávila, 1965, p. 160).

Since teachers could forego applying tests, the child's learning needs should be met by the classroom activities developed. D'Ávila recommended the literacy techniques developed by educators Orminda Isabel Marques and Juracy Silveira, whose works were also based on new education principles.

In *A escrita na escola primária* (1950)<sup>6</sup>, Orminda Isabel Marques considered the ABC tests a valuable resource for identifying the conditions presented by children themselves for learning to write, but due to the legislation underpinning the grouping of students by age instead of the psychological criterion of maturity, she proposed another strategy to meet the stages of child development: primary school teachers from the former Federal District should elaborate classroom activities based on muscular calligraphy, which required

[...] rhythmic movements of the forearm, the result of which was a sloping, good handwriting, with letters uniform in size and connections, obtained by traction and not by pressure. Unlike the previous denominations which referred to the shape of the letter, vertical or slanted, the new calligraphy was called muscular, indicating the necessary relation between movement and writing (Vidal, 1998, p. 3).

Learning to write by muscular calligraphy foresaw that the school year should be divided into two periods: the first a preparatory phase, with exercises that should favor games, the use of toys and drawings (Vidal, 1998); and the second focused on specific exercises, such as “[...] accomplishing the shape of the letters” (Marques, 1950, p. 99).

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6 A partial examination of Marques' work (1950) regarding the most appropriate age for literacy learning according to the child's level of maturity was presented at the V Brazilian Literacy Congress (Leme, 2021).

Recommendations that pedagogical activities planned by teachers be adapted to the students' individualities, viewed as a fundamental principle for modernizing teaching, reappear in *Leitura na escola primária: guia para normalistas e professores de curso primário* (Silveira, 1966)<sup>7</sup>, by teacher Juracy Silveira, and in *Ensinando à criança: guia para o professores primário* (1970), signed by teachers of the Guanabara Institute of Education Alayde Madeira Marcozzi, Leny Werneck Dornelles and Marion Villas Boas Sá Rêgo.

According to Silveira (1966) and Marcozzi et al. (1970), the ABC tests represented a reliable resource that could contribute greatly to child education, but their application and how teachers evaluated the results should be questioned. This is why they should be considered as allies in the teaching practice, but not as a substitute for the teachers' daily evaluation of each student's behavior. Teachers' daily records of the children's needs were considered indispensable to organizing school contents so as to meet student needs.

As highlighted by the previous considerations, for the new education movement, the issue of a suitable literacy environment related to the problem of class grouping, which should be done with child development in mind. The ABC tests, by identifying the maturity level of students for literacy learning, were remembered by some authors as a valuable resource to meet this requirement, although others considered chronological age as a sufficient criterion.

Silveira, for example, when addressing the teaching of reading, recommended “[...] that classes be organized according to chronological age, respecting as much as possible the age range for the 1st grade—7 to 8 years” (1966, p. 74). Marcozzi, in turn, stated that at age 7 children usually present a mental age compatible with learning, often even at age 6 and a half (Marcozzi et al., 1970).

Debates over these issues also appears in the constructivist pedagogical discourses of the following decades. In her book *Alfabetização Natural* (1988), Gilda Rizzo, a teacher with experience in teaching and literacy classrooms in Rio de Janeiro, defended that literacy learning should follow Piaget's theory and the psycholinguistic studies developed by psychologist Heloisa Marinho at the Rio de Janeiro Institute of Education. Similarly, Vilma Mello Biscolla, a literacy teacher in public schools in São Paulo, based her book *Construindo a alfabetização* (1991) on Piaget's and Ferreiro's formulations. Her writings proposed new directions for literacy teaching, leaving the new education discourse in the past.

For Biscolla (1991), the recommendations proposed by the new education movement illustrated a pedagogical past to be overcome, because they produced a “mechanistic” literacy practice through a “tiring” school routine. Moreover, the author criticizes the organization of classrooms based on tests results, including the

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7 A partial analysis of the book, precisely about the argument that literacy learning should begin respecting the child's developmental stage in articulation with the appropriate age, was presented at the XI Brazilian Congress on History of Education (Leme, 2022).

ABCs, because associating literacy learning with the child's level of maturity and/or readiness also implies holding students themselves responsible for their capacity to learn or not. In 1988, Rizzo also rejects the identification of maturity by applying tests and/or that children are prevented from learning by a supposed absence of maturity.

In case of difficulties during the literacy process, children should no longer be treated according to their level of maturity, but according to their learning "rhythm," which required teachers to propose different activities for students in the same class (Rizzo, 1988). Experts in the 1990s also recommended differentiated activities for students in the same class, but only after a diagnostic evaluation by the teacher to identify the hypotheses children formulate about writing (Biscolla, 1991). Although classroom homogenization is no longer recommended, homogeneous groups are organized within the same class by the hypothesis regarding writing as part of teaching literacy to children, now supported by constructivism.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as well as in the pedagogical discourses published in 1966 and 1970, experts were little concerned with establishing an appropriate age for beginning literacy, since a child's age group did not prevent literacy learning. Rizzo (1988) and Biscolla (1991), from a constructivist perspective, shared the idea that children were able to learn literacy by age 7, and sometimes before that. Understanding that the conditions for child learning were mainly related to the organization of the school environment in its physical and affective aspects, the classroom space should be prepared by the teacher for "[...] the full, comprehensive and harmonious development of the individual" (Rizzo, 1988, p. 33). According to Biscolla (1991), this principle was fundamental and could be called "literacy environment."

After these brief considerations about the recommendations made by the pedagogical discourses on literacy teaching, according to what they understood to be suitable for child development, we now highlight the transformations undergone in the transition from the new education perspective to the constructivist discourse. In 1930, verifying the maturity levels by ABC testing to form homogeneous classrooms was considered the most suitable measure for child literacy; in the 1940s and 1950s, experts still considered the maturity criteria and the child's interest in learning literacy, but when tests could not be applied, teachers should simply adopt "modern teaching techniques" to achieve satisfactory results. In the mid-1960s and 1970s, the pedagogical discourse began to emphasize appropriate teaching techniques, while the tests available took a back seat or were being challenged among new education advocates. The environment conducive to literacy thus takes on a different contour. Measuring the child's learning capabilities continued to be relevant, but this evaluation was based on record sheets derived from the teachers' own formulations and observations. Such a scenario suggests that the modes of child literacy varied more than their underpinning theories, thus considering only the theories in force is insufficient to know what the corresponding practices were.



Still at the level of these disputed and unstable discursive formulations, the experts who were in favor of constructivism shifted their concern from whether or not the child was mature and/or capable of literacy learning to whether or not the teacher knew how to teach. This knowledge was evaluated in terms of the teacher's mastery of child development according to Piaget's development stages. Moreover, their attention turned to the school environment and its conditions to favor or hinder literacy learning. Thus, it seems important to reflect on how teachers appropriated this knowledge, considering the intersection with teaching conceptions that, even in constant dispute, allow the circulation of a long-lasting statement in Pedagogy: "under what conditions can children learn literacy," which implies understanding the school environment as an aspect capable of favoring or hindering literacy.

## **MATERIALITY OF THE CLASSROOM AND QUALITY OF THE LITERACY ENVIRONMENT**

By analyzing the expert recommendations on the materiality of the classroom we can identify differences between the new education and constructivist discourses. The first called attention to the architectural quality and hygiene of the space where literacy classes would take place, considering aspects such as lighting, ventilation, circulation, space per child in the classroom, furniture ergonomics to favor the correct posture for reading and handwriting exercises.

Maria Montessori—an Italian doctor, pedagogue, and important figure in the new education movement—formulated her own method to ensure child development in school. For the educator, the adult was responsible for preparing the environment and the conditions so that children could develop their potentialities. Her proposal required the teachers to pay attention to the arrangement of furniture and teaching resources in the classroom, allowing children to move freely and use this space productively. In short: "A suitable environment, a good teacher and scientific materials are the three points that can help the child in learning moments" (Paschoal & Machado, 2019, p. 214).

Authors aligned to the constructivist perspective emphasized the actual pedagogical quality of the environment, that is, how the very arrangement of books, drawing materials, posters, games, and other teaching materials in the classroom could make it inviting for literacy learning. With the constructivists, the environment began to be considered as a pedagogical resource available to the teacher. Preparing a "literacy environment," attractive enough to make literacy learning an almost entirely spontaneous process, dispensing as much as possible with teacher instruction, became a key concern for this pedagogical perspective.

In *Práticas escolares: de acordo com o programa de prática do ensino do curso normal e com a orientação do ensino primário* (D'Ávila, 1965), D'Ávila addresses, in a specific chapter, the materiality of the school environment, which should meet the developing children's interests, thus respecting their physical and psychological needs for learning. Classrooms should be well lit and ventilated, because dark environments could cause damage to students' eyesight. Besides, one should consider that the sun contributed to the children's organism by "[...] stimulating circulation, strengthening muscular tonus, increasing physical and neural energy [...]" (D'Ávila, 1965, p. 8), as stated by the teacher and physician Antônio Ferreira de Almeida Júnior in a note about hygiene teaching, published by the São Paulo Board of Public Works (1936).

In the book *Ensinando à criança: guia para o professor primário*, Marcozzi et al. (1970) assigned teachers the responsibility of assessing the appropriateness of using artificial light or curtains, as well as when windows should be left open or closed to avoid both twilight and direct light in students' eyes, which prevented good eyesight. These considerations were only presented in the books published in 1940 and 1970, but other aspects reveal the hygienist precepts contained in the new education discourses, for which investing in child health at school was a condition for their good development and learning and, consequently, for national progress, since children were the citizens of the future.

Classroom furniture should correspond to children's physical development to avoid damage to the spine. Experts recommended attention to children's comfort, so that when sitting, their feet could reach the floor (D'Ávila, 1965; Marcozzi et al., 1970). Desks fixed to the floor, part of the traditional school furniture, came to be considered as objects of torture because they prevented children from moving. Teachers should ensure the possibility of changing the furniture arrangement and guaranteeing children's mobility during the activities, which should be "[...] lively and calm" (Marcozzi et al., 1970, p. 141).

When addressing pre-service teachers in her book *A escrita na escola primária* (1950), Marques detailed recommendations on adjusting the student's posture in relation to the desk and the paper:

Students should seat facing the desk, with the desk seat at a sufficient height so that the feet naturally land on the floor. The arms should rest on the top of the desk, keeping the elbows ten or twelve centimeters from the body. The body and head should be kept almost erect, with a slight forward tilt. The forearms, on the desk, should face each other; the left hand will hold the paper and move it to a new position when required. The paper placed in front of the child should be tilted to the left, so that the bottom line makes a 30° angle with the edge of the desk. The forearms should rest about 3/4 of the length of the desk (Marques, 1950, p. 57).

Such a detailed excerpt stemmed from the idea that teachers should master knowledge about the psychology of learning and physiology; the latter corresponded to the hand movement when writing and the adequacy of children's bodies to the school space. According to Vidal (1998), the technique defended by Marques, called muscular calligraphy, was articulated to a relevant movement in the early 20th century, which brought new features to the school culture: the “[...] didactic rationalization of writing [...]” from which operated the “[...] bodily rationalization of the students [...],” thus aiming to form “[...] habits of order and cleanliness and mental discipline” (D’Ávila, 1965, p. 223; Vidal, 1998, p. 3).

In pedagogy, these guidelines illustrated the strategies teachers should employ to innovate teaching methodologies. In her book *Leitura na escola prima: guia para normalistas e professorôres de curso primário* (1966), critiquing what she considered to be traditional teaching, Silveira relates the immobility of the child to outdated teaching rather than to risks to children's health:

The class will present a dynamic, living, working aspect, in contrast to the stale atmosphere of a traditional class where 30 children sit for hours, physically present but spiritually absent [...]. Instead of this artificial atmosphere, this teaching comparable to a universal panacea, this boring and discouraging environment, we will see the same 30 children distributed in various groups according to their preferences, eagerly engaged in accomplishing their tasks (Silveira, 1966, p. 161-162).

In her book *Alfabetização natural* (1988), Rizzo, based on constructivist precepts, proposes organizing a classroom where the furniture arrangement would oppose the traditional practice characterized by desks lined up that hindered developing distinct activities for each group of students. Biscolla (1991), a supporter of Ferreiro's and Piaget's constructivism, in her work *Construindo a alfabetização* (1991), considered the whole classroom environment as a fundamental resource for modern teaching.

Disputes between the old and the new underlay the recommendations of experts aligned with the new education movement, but with the (literal) emergence of the classroom environment as a space that must be organized by teachers to escape the standards attributed to traditional pedagogies in 1966. Silveira also distanced herself from the new education discourse, which would go from being innovative to outdated. In her proposal, classroom organization is unrelated to the primary commitment to ensure children's health. Rizzo (1988) and Biscolla (1991) also disregarded this recommendation, proposing to create a more pedagogical environment aiming to favor literacy, in which furniture organization and material disposition differed from the traditional arrangement.

Analyzing the recommendations regarding the disposition of teaching resources allows us to understand the different conceptions of school environment at

play: from the healthy environment defended by the new education, organized according to hygienist prescriptions, to the “literacy environment” developed by the constructivists based on psycho-pedagogical precepts.

Teachers should pay attention to the materials displayed in the environment, because “walls full of badly chosen pictures, placed before the children’s eyes from the beginning to the end of the school year [...] harm the educational work” (D’Ávila, 1965, p. 17). Materials and walls in vibrant colors were inappropriate because they contributed to children’s emotional imbalance and hindered their concentration in performing activities (D’Ávila, 1965; Marcozzi et al., 1970).

According to the new education discourse, decorating the classroom with posters produced by the children had pedagogical value, as long as the teacher selected the “[...] most perfect works” (Marques, 1950, p. 145). For Vidal, this was because “the beauty of the composition emerged from the link between the disciplined line and the rationalized content. The poster was beautiful because it was clear and concise” (1998, p. 7). The proposal thus urged teachers to follow an “aesthetic sense” when selecting the best handwritings and works to be exhibited. By assigning another aesthetic sense to the visual resources available in classrooms, constructivists contraindicated “[...] ornaments and decorations made by adults, let alone the teacher, as these will act as models difficult to attain and undermine or at least inhibit children’s imagination [...]” (Rizzo, 1988, p. 43).

In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1970s it seemed acceptable that teachers should define beauty and that children should reproduce this standard; by 1980, however, this direction was viewed as harmful to the childhood development. This points to a subtle difference between both discourses and the emergence of the “literacy environment” in pedagogical discourses.

Among the books examined in this article, the expression “literacy environment” appears as such only in *Construindo a alfabetização* (1991). Biscolla stated that this environment should have a series of materials (books, magazines, newspapers, etc., as well as the children’s written production), which in turn should always be within the physical and/or visual reach of students during class:

Presenting the alphabet was also part of the literacy environment organization. Made by me, on cardboard paper, it was presented and pasted on the blackboard. All my students knew that to read or write they would need letters and these were posted on the blackboard so they could construct their writing (Biscolla, 1991, p. 31).

The most efficient way to promote children’s contact with the available materials also concerned the school spaces organized in the classroom itself, commonly called “corners” or “little corners,” but also beyond it. A modern school

offered classrooms, a library, reading rooms, games, singing, crafts, etc. (D'Avila, 1965). Marques (1950, p. 120) recommended that teachers encourage “[...] the class to write a sentence well and quickly on a particular poster, for the museum, or for the class library.” Even without employing the terms “corner” or “little corner,” the class presented in 1950 had spaces similar to those suggested by other specialists in different periods, since this strategy for organizing school classes first appeared in the new education discourses and was reframed by constructivist pedagogy.

Silveira (1966, p. 52) considered that the “little corner of novelties,” as well as the “wall newspaper” and the “reading board” positively fostered the child’s relationship with reading. Marcozzi et al. (1970) also supported the organization of corners—for painting, reading, etc.—as a way to promote literacy. Rizzo (1988), in turn, described the environment based on the activities to be developed with the children, yet she still included the “reading corner” as part of the ideal classroom.

On this topic, the accounts in *Construindo a alfabetização* (1991) reveal that the whole school environment could and should be literacy-oriented. According to Biscolla’s guidelines, the “literacy environment” was considered to be so because it was closely linked to the formulations that characterized it associated with the affective bond between the teacher and the children and, simultaneously, with the exercises proposed in class. As an example on this last point:

From the very beginning, I started to organize and experience together with the students the literacy environment. In addition to the name tags distributed on the first day of class, the students received two sheets with their names. One, to be placed on the edge of the desk for better identification of the students, being distributed and collected daily, and another that was left with the students so they could use it at home to read or copy the name (Biscolla, 1991, p. 29).

Biscolla’s account allows us to demonstrate that “the historical explanation” for the ways of teaching child literacy “[...] does not follow routes set in stone” (Veyne, 1971, p. 296-297). In other words, the environment prepared by the teacher for child development and learning as an inherent element of pedagogical practice does not appear *ab initio* in constructivist literacy proposals, but incorporates elements from the new education pedagogy, assigning them new meanings and functions.

Hence, it seems that the pedagogical discourses elaborated in the 1980s disseminated in Brazil a “[...] certain illusory consensus that learning is independent of teaching” (Mortatti, 2019, p. 40). This perspective, to a greater or lesser degree, proposed that teachers should teach without seeming to teach and children should learn without being informed about it.

## BEYOND MATERIALITY: THE SOCIAL AND AFFECTIVE QUALITIES OF A SUITABLE LITERACY ENVIRONMENT

These recommendations about the necessary conditions for a suitable literacy environment referred not only to the hygienic organization of the space and the classroom distribution of pedagogical materials, but also included considerations about its social and affective qualities. Experts argued that children needed to feel safe and confident to learn, which required paying attention to the social relations established at school between teachers and children, as well as to the emotions expressed.

Importantly, the social and affective factors were directly articulated to the physical characteristics of this space, as highlighted by the following passage in Lourenço Filho's book *Testes ABC para verificação da maturidade necessária à aprendizagem da leitura e da escrita* (2008):

The office or room where the tests take place must be secluded, quiet, well lit, and devoid of excessive ornamentation or a multitude of furniture or objects. In school groups, the headmaster's office is almost always the most suitable location. But the classroom itself can be used, as long as each student is called on in turn. Family members or strangers should not be present. If the examiner has an assistant to take notes, he or she should remain silent, avoiding gestures or exchanges of glances that could translate his or hers impressions of the examination (Lourenço Filho, 2008, p. 104).

To the required organization of the physical space so as to avoid distractions during examination, was added the concern to prevent children from being emotionally affected by the presence of family members or by the favorable or unfavorable judgment of examiners. Another guideline is that the ABC tests should not be administered “[...] before the child has attended school for some time, interacting with the teacher responsible for administering the test [...],” emphasizing the conviction that children would perform better if they were already familiar with the elements present in the test (Lourenço Filho, 2008, p. 155). These precautions highlight the importance given to child psychology by the new education movement.

For children classified as immature, previous experience in the physical and pedagogical environment of the classroom assumed greater importance, to the point of being considered a condition for literacy onset. A preparatory stage was foreseen, during which children were to participate in

[...] outdoor exercises: breathing, walking, balance and attention exercises, dancing, jumping, running, playing. Other educational games: scrabble, solitaire, dominoes, recognition, shape sorter,

building blocks, drawing, cutting out, coloring, gluing, folding, wrapping, lining boxes, modeling; searching, discovering, grouping, separating objects, figures, etc. (see parts A, B, C, and D). There should be a reasonable adaptation to the classroom material and environment, without immediately introducing formal literacy (Lourenço Filho, 2008, p. 134).

Lourenço Filho (2008) associated children's previous contact with the school space and materials—pencils, paper, and scissors—with the feeling of security, of being at ease in the school environment, without which it was impossible to adequately assess children's maturity for starting literacy learning. This concerned mainly children who had not attended kindergarten, or those who lived in faraway regions and whose unfamiliarity with the school environment put them at unfavorable conditions for learning. On the other hand, the feelings expressed by children at school were not always associated with the conditions of its environment. When children did not perform as expected, examiners commonly resorted to the argument of the child's social environment impairment, also resumed by Lourenço Filho's discourse:

The observations registered by the examiner during the exam, in the case of more emotional students (excessive shyness, aggressiveness, negative attitude, etc.) will lead them to suspect disturbances in other adaptive modalities—those of social life—, with more serious adaptation problems. (Lourenço Filho, 2008, p. 126).

New Education pedagogical discourses constantly argued that integration into the school environment required teachers to understand that these children came “[...] from the most diverse social and family backgrounds [...],” which inevitably interfered in their school performance. Thus, teachers should consider teaching for student integration in a “[...] social and complex environment [...],” which required classroom work guided by “[...] calm and respect” (D'Ávila, 1965, p. 9, 56, 175).

Another aspect of this concern with school environment quality emphasized its social dimension and referred to the importance of adapting it to the needs of life in a modern society. This consideration is resumed in *A escrita na escola primária* (1950), when Orminda Isabel Marques quotes Anísio Teixeira, for whom:

School should provide each individual with the means to participate fully, according to their natural abilities, in the social and economic life of modern civilization, while equipping them to understand and guide themselves within the perpetually changing environment that characterizes this civilization (Teixeira, 1932 apud Marques, 1950, p. 12).

In this excerpt, Marques reproduces an idea dear to the new education movement, which also refers to child psychology: the advocacy of an education that was simultaneously for all and within the limits of students' own capacities. Only such a school would be perceived by students as an environment that is both stimulating and reliable, in which everyone could feel safe and motivated to learn. So highlighted Silveira (1966, p. 41) when she stated that learning to read depended on “[...] individual conditions, such as type of intelligence, previous experience, cultural environment at home, artistic sensibility, etc.”

They defended that children from families with a lacking habit of reading would undoubtedly have greater difficulty in their initial contact with the school environment. But the issue went beyond prior contact with reading at home; the possible effects of a disruptive home environment on the child's behavior at school were also considered. After all, according to Marcozzi et al. (1970, p. 126), “[...] emotional control interferes with the capacity to learn”. Also for Rizzo, in her book *Alfabetização natural*:

One must know each student intimately, especially regarding family relations or their previous school experiences. Insecurity, fear, anxiety, and anguish are feelings that inhibit or block learning and can seriously affect the discovery of reading (Rizzo, 1988, p. 156).

Thus, teachers were responsible for preparing an environment that would awaken the children's joy and confidence (Silveira, 1966; Marcozzi et al., 1970). It is further argued that, when attentive and trained, the good teacher would know which children “[...] receive and give affection, companionship, and those who are marginal to them. It allows us to know those who share the ideals of the class, those who are accepted, and those who only coexist with their peers” (Silveira, 1966, p. 89)<sup>8</sup>. According to the author, the latter should have more teacher support, so that they can effectively adapt to the school environment. Consequently, teacher should monitor and ensure that these students make careful use of school materials, do their homework, act cordially with their classmates and employees, and respect the school disciplinary rules, for example. By acquiring these desirable behaviors, children would supposedly also win the affection of their peers.

According to Biscolla (1991), conditions conducive to learning could only be created by forming a “socio-affective environment” in the classroom, which required considering the feelings and emotions children manifested when teachers offered an environment that “transpired” safety, affection, and respect. This was indispensable

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<sup>8</sup> Failure to learn as a result of a child's supposed biological inability or the cultural deficit of their families was harshly criticized by Maria Helena Souza Patto in her book *A produção do fracasso escolar*, among other authors. Based on the cultural deficit model, she argued that the scientism installed in the school by psychology, and the tests exemplified this, naturalized social inequalities and hindered understanding the complex causes of school failure (Lima, 2019; Patto, 2015).



for configuring a literacy environment that wished to consider the child's "cultural baggage" and "social environment," even if these elements could no longer be used to justify academic failure.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Pedagogical discourses on literacy addressed to teachers and published in Brazil between 1930 and 1990 formulated considerations and recommendations about the suitable environment for teaching and learning. As argued in the analysis, we can discern both continuities and transformations in these discourses throughout the period considered. The perceived changes could refer to the transition between the new education discourse and the constructivist perspective.

For the authors aligned with the new education movement, a suitable environment should present architectural and hygienic conditions consistent with the needs of a school and with child development. Aspects related to adequate ventilation, lighting, and circulation for the classroom should be considered, as well as those related to furniture appropriate to the size of growing children. Moreover, one should consider children's need for movement, which required adaptations of space and routine so that children were not forced to remain immobile and concentrated for long periods of time, which was against their nature and detrimental to both their health and academic performance. Instead, experts valued the flexible arrangement of furniture so as to allow work in small groups, as well as alternation between intellectual work and physical activity and manual labor.

In constructivist discourses, the previous concerns with architectural conditions and salubrity become secondary to that of creating in the classroom a literacy environment, that is, a space in which the teaching materials were arranged so as to stimulate children's interest in literacy and to encourage them to read and write in their own way, informed by their own needs. Children were expected to invent and discover reading and writing spontaneously, by interacting with each other and with the books, games, and other texts provided by the teacher.

Despite having clearly differentiated themselves from the previous discourses on school environment organization, and referring to the new education perspective as outdated, constructivist authors do not produce a real rupture with what was being proposed. Rather, they took a step further towards centering the pedagogical discourse on child learning, to which teaching should be subordinated.

New education statements certainly emphasized "how teachers should teach," but still teaching required first of all the teacher's mastery of child psychology, without which they could not formulate pedagogic activities consistent with a modern, healthy school environment and legitimize education as an instrument for

national progress. Under constructivist precepts, experts indicated that the modern psychology to be followed by teachers required knowing “how children learn,” and no longer “how teachers should teach.” Thus, disseminating the information that children formulated their own hypotheses about literacy even before entering school.

As demonstrated, the characteristics attributed by experts to what would be a literacy environment do not allow us to view the proposal as completely original. However, the effects produced by this formulation undoubtedly transformed pedagogical discourses regarding the ways in which educators understood childhood and literacy.

By positing that the classroom could be a literacy environment, constructivists erased the teacher’s role, which is to teach. Moreover, one cannot assume that an environment can promote literacy by itself, as if imbued with its own intentionality and actions.

In our understanding, whatever the teaching-learning conception underlining education, student learning results from teachers’ planning and performance, which can occur in many ways, including oral transmission, demonstration, proposition of exercises, or even the previous preparation of a “literacy” environment. In other words, in a space that invites children to explore literacy, where the teacher remains available as another learning resource. In conclusion, every literacy environment requires the discernment and daily work of the teacher who takes responsibility for student learning.

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