

Research reports

Teaching choices: the curriculum in action in elementary school

Escolhas docentes: o currículo em ação nos anos iniciais do ensino fundamental

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Abstract

This article discusses the curriculum and didactic choices of two teachers from a public school in São Paulo, who taught in the 3rd and 5th grades of elementary school in 2024, based on the model of pedagogical practice that favors learning for all, as referred to by Bernstein. The context of this study coincides with the implementation of a curriculum proposal produced in 2017, whose process was subjected to the pandemic and post-pandemic context, undergoing numerous revisions with consequences for its appropriation by teachers. Based on classroom observations, pedagogical practices related to the subjects of Portuguese Language, Mathematics, and Science were characterized by analyzing whether and how they tend to favor access to learning for their students. The results highlight relevant features of the model above in the observed practices, such as strong framing on selection and sequence, and weak, on pace. However, in these practices, there are other aspects that deserve attention regarding the consolidation of learning that is compatible with the students' potential, in dialogue with the curriculum proposal and with the educational challenges related to its implementation in an atypical context for education systems.

Keywords: curriculum in action; teaching practice; teaching of Portuguese Language, Mathematics and Sciences in Elementary Education; Basil Bernstein.

Resumo

Este artigo trata das escolhas curriculares e didáticas de duas professoras de uma escola pública paulistana, que lecionavam nos 3^o e 5^o anos do Ensino Fundamental, em 2024, baseando-se no modelo de prática pedagógica favorável à aprendizagem de todos, referenciado em Bernstein. O contexto deste estudo coincide com a implementação de uma proposta curricular, produzida em 2017, cujo processo esteve à mercê do contexto pandêmico e pós-pandêmico, passando por inúmeras revisões com consequências para sua apropriação pelos docentes. Com base em observações de aulas, caracterizaram-se práticas pedagógicas relativas às disciplinas de Língua Portuguesa, Matemática e Ciências, analisando se e como tendem a favorecer o acesso às aprendizagens por seus estudantes. Os resultados evidenciam traços relevantes do referido modelo nas práticas observadas, como o forte enquadramento da seleção e do sequenciamento de conteúdos, e o fraco enquadramento no que se refere ao compassamento. No entanto, nessas práticas, há outros aspectos que mereceriam atenção no que se refere à consolidação de aprendizagens compatíveis com o potencial dos estudantes, em diálogo com a proposta curricular e com os desafios educacionais atinentes à sua implementação em um contexto atípico para os sistemas de ensino.

Palavras-chave: currículo em ação; prática docente; ensino de Língua Portuguesa, Matemática e Ciências no Ensino Fundamental; Basil Bernstein.

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INTRODUCTION

It is nothing new to state that the choices of form and content made by teachers, when developing their lessons, are centered on configuring the curriculum in action (Gimeno Sacristán, 2000). Similarly, it is not surprising to find that several factors, both internal and external to schools, interconnect with what is prescribed in the curriculum and what is effectively developed in meetings between teachers and students. Based on this view, we present the results of a study we conducted aimed at understanding the effects of curriculum and didactic choices made by early elementary education teachers from the municipal education system in Sao Paulo, within the context of implementing a recent curriculum proposition.

The analysis proposed is in tune with what several authors have been developing about the preparation and implementation of education policy processes and the action of agents in charge of implementing them, according to Stephen Ball and Richard Bowe (Lopes; Macedo, 2011; Mainardes, 2018; Moreira, 2017; Stremel; Mainardes, 2018; Carrijo, 2021). The common thread lies in the emphasis placed on instability and the possibility of creating new policies based on officially established prescriptions. In other words, it is important to reinforce that the phases for preparing and implementing policies should not be analyzed separately. The research this paper deals with focus on the context of practice, which, according to Carrijo (2021, p. 1221), “[...] is creative and not robotized; however, it also does not escape the impositions of already established power relations and discourses”.

The investigation focuses on choices established in curriculum guidance documents from the public education system (São Paulo, 2019) and discusses them via debates on content and approach that are relevant to student education within the fields of Portuguese Language, Mathematics and Science, and finally analyzing that set of choices against what teachers have been able to develop in their classes – monitored throughout 2024. We did not expect to assess how much those professionals are or are not able to meet what the prescriptions define, but, rather, we questioned the relevance and adequacy of the prescriptions themselves, as well as, and centrally, the conditions that teachers find in schools to make their choices, which are seen as essential for learning development. This study focuses on practices that 3rd and 5th grade teachers applied to approaching knowledge related to the Portuguese Language, Mathematics and Science subjects.

The main theoretical reference used for the analysis developed here is Bernstein’s theory. Bernstein was an education sociologist, whose intellectual production remained intense from the early 1960s to 2000, when the last version of his book titled *Pedagogia, Controle Simbólico e Identidade* (*Pedagogy, Symbolic Control, and Identity*) was published. During that period, he dedicated himself to refining the concepts he had developed, aiming at clarifying the mechanisms by which, via communication – in the form it takes and not only in the content it privileges – the identities of subjects are consolidated and their positions, within a given power configuration, tend to be passed down from generation to generation.

According to the author, that view detaches from the social reproduction theory, which is restricted to analyzing privileged content to be conveyed, an aspect on which investigations have multiplied, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. In his analysis, the author turns to the pedagogical device that conveys legitimized content, which, according to social reproduction theory authors, is selected based on the interests of powerful groups, thus creating social inequalities associated with the distribution of power in society. However, Bernstein does not believe that simply considering selected content is enough for understanding the process by which these inequalities are normalized.

His early studies focus on pedagogical communication, and from there, the concepts he developed became increasingly complex, in a quest to create mechanisms for understanding how power and control relations are communicated to individuals by positioning them socially and contributing to shaping their identities. In his later writings, he returns to the issue of privileged content to be conveyed by initiating an important reflection on the relations between the nature of knowledge and pedagogy, which has since been developed by several researchers across the world, particularly those linked to social realism (Young, 2007; Young; Muller, 2016; Hoadley, 2018; Hoadley; Muller, 2023).

According to the author, classification and framing are key concepts for discussing pedagogical communication. The first refers to relations between categories, which can be of subjects (teacher and student, doctor and patient, architect and client etc.), of discourses (math and science, school knowledge and non-school knowledge etc.) or spaces (teacher's space and student's space, school and community etc.).

For Bernstein (2000), relationships of power within a society establish boundaries between categories. To refer to relations between categories, he developed the concept of classification, which does not define the attributes of a category, but the relation between categories. Concerning the discourse categories of school subjects in the elementary education curriculum, Mathematics, Portuguese, Science, for instance, those are categories that, for the author, represent a social division of discursive labor: "[...] if these discourses are differently specialized, then they must have a space in which they develop their unique identities, identities with their own internal rules and special voices. It can be French, German, History, if we think about the school" (Bernstein, 2000, p. 6). It is the essential space that creates a category's specialization and what is maintained is the detachment from the other categories: "A can only be A, if it can be effectively isolated from B. Accordingly, there is no A if there is no relation between A and something else" (Bernstein, 2000, p. 6). It is the detachment among categories that allows them to keep their specificities, whether they are discursive or of a different order (teacher and student, parents and children, school and community etc.). According to the author: "[...] it is the isolation between discourse categories that maintains the principles of their division of labor [between school subjects, in our example]" (Bernstein, 2000, p. 6).

Thus, classification translates the power relations that define social division of labor. What keeps the isolation between categories is power, which, for the author, is expressed in the classification principle, which, in turn, can be either strong or weak. In the first case, power relations guarantee category isolation, which has its own specificities and voices; in the second case, power relations enable greater closeness between categories, with the consequent threat to the categories' specificities.

To deal with the control of pedagogic communication, Bernstein developed the concept of framing, which is what translates society's relation control, by defining the legitimate message of a category: "[...] if the classification principle provides us with voice and the means to recognize it, then the framing principle is the means to acquire the legitimate message" (Bernstein, 2000, p. 12). Thus, it refers to who controls what. Pedagogical communication in the classroom refers to the nature of control over the selection of what is to be communicated (teaching content); the sequence of communication (what comes first, what comes next); the pace (the expected rate of acquisition in relation to what is to be communicated); and the assessment criteria (how clear is what counts as legitimate content and form of communicating what has been learned). When the framing is characterized as strong, then the teacher has the clear control over selection, sequence, pace and assessment criteria; when the framing is characterized as weak, then the student holds greater control over those factors.

Hoadley (2018) refers to a broad tradition of Bernsteinian-based research in elementary education classrooms; for the author, these studies seek to produce a more precise delimitation of teaching processes that engender social reproduction, as well as how to interrupt it. According to the author, that production: "[...] has brought notable contribution to identifying the specific dimensions of pedagogical practice favorable to children from low-income families" (Hoadley, 2018, p. 166-167).

According to the author, what these studies have highlighted is that the structure of a pedagogical practice that takes on a strong framing of assessment criteria, a weak framing of hierarchical relationships and variable pace favors the success of students who are in disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions. In other words, the pedagogical model presented in these productions suggests that it is potentially favorable to everyone's learning that the teacher be very clear about what constitutes relevant knowledge in class ("what"), as well as how students should communicate what they learn ("how") – it is up to the teacher to make clear what matters. Another important aspect is that the control over the time students take to acquire knowledge is not rigidly defined by the teacher, who needs to be attentive to it. In addition to this, there is a strong classification of school knowledge that defines the boundaries between this type of knowledge, and the knowledge students gain with their everyday experiences.

In this study, we consider that pedagogical model as reference for analyzing the practices monitored in 3rd and 5th grade classes in elementary education school belonging to the municipal school system in São Paulo, particularly when it comes to pedagogical characteristics: selection, sequence, pace and assessment criteria.

METHODOLOGICAL AND ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES

The choice to conduct the research within the public school system is justified by the fact that it brings together schools that serve most of the school-age population in the municipality of São Paulo – which underscores the relevance of a discussion about the curriculum and the access to school knowledge. Regarding the subjects focused on in this study, the fact that student performance in Portuguese Language, Mathematics, and Science is the preferred focus of standardized assessments, which justifies their selection. Thus, it is understood that these subjects have become central for the curriculum dimension that aims at defining what should be learned in elementary education at school. To some extent, this suggests the existence of pressure or more visible control strategies over the teachers' choices about how to conduct their classes in the pursuit of obtaining good results in these assessments.

For this research, we chose to observe early elementary education classes because we expected to recognize the choices related to the three subjects on which the study focuses on. The starting point was observing that the 3rd grade is the stage of consolidating literacy and approaching mathematical knowledge, and the 5th grade, according to the prescriptions, is characterized by greater openness to knowledge of other subjects, in the case of this study, Science.

The two participating schools were selected based on convenience; they were two schools that volunteered for the study, and, since some of their management team members were already acquainted with some of the researchers, they agreed to participate. After the project was presented to the management and teaching staff of both schools, by mutual agreement, one 3rd grade class and one 5th grade class from each school was selected for data collection. All classes taught by the teachers responsible for them were observed during the period of two non-consecutive weeks (one in the first semester and the other in the second semester of 2024), which added up to 40 hours of observation per class.

The teachers monitored were responsible for all subjects, except those taught by specialist teachers, who were not monitored, such as Arts, Physical Education, English, as well as classes aimed at curriculum expansion, such as Digital Education and Reading Room and Space. The reason for monitoring all those teachers' classes was to identify any parameters used for conducting them, the nature of the curriculum and didactic choices within that context of implementing a new curriculum proposal, and the specificities established for approaching different subjects that make up the school curriculum.

As previously explained, we were dealing with observations conducted in a 3rd grade and a 5th grade classes from only one of the schools that took part in the research. When organizing the classroom observation protocol and producing field notes, attention was paid to the pedagogical characteristics mentioned earlier and referred to by Hoadley (2018), which reveal the specialization of time, space, and text in those classes. Concerning time and space, the idea was to identify how to determine them within the pedagogical activity, for teaching purposes.

Concerning text – the privileged legitimate text (Hoadley, 2018, p. 224) – it can be understood as the object of knowledge. As for the analysis of the privileged text in class, the observation protocol broadly focused on aspects, such as class structure, emphasized the teaching content, activities developed, time allocated to different activities, and interactions between teachers and students in different classroom situations. For the analysis developed in this work, elements of Bernstein's theory were employed, notably the characteristics of pedagogical practice and the creation of learning conditions (Bernstein, 2000; Neves; Morais, 2001; Hoadley, 2018).

Based on field notes, the characteristics observed in the classes of the monitored groups were systematized according to aspects listed previously while seeking to understand the characteristics of each group and establish contrasts between the practices observed. Chart 1 outlines the observed aspects and the focus of analysis regarding each of these characteristics.

Chart 1. Characteristics of the pedagogical practices considered in the analysis.

Characteristics	Aspects analyzed
Class structure	a. Start of class: it encompasses preliminary sequences related to didactic activities; it is defined by the time students and teacher enter the classroom, and the initial contacts between them. b. Class development: it encompasses sequences of didactic-academic activities that are subdivided into introduction/preparation, development, and conclusion. c. End of meeting: it is defined by the time the teacher and the students leave the classroom.
Content mobilized	a. How often school subjects are addressed. b. Distribution of school subjects across the class timetable. c. Content mobilized in the sequences of didactic-academic activities.
Activities developed	a. Types of activities. b. Time allocated for completing the activities. c. How the activities were proposed and carried out.
Time allocated for the activities	Management of time allocated for developing didactic-academic sequences.
Interactions between teachers and students	a. How content is explained. b. Clear and precise explanation to students about what is considered relevant content and how to present what has been learned. c. Openness to student interventions. d. Attention given to what students point out during class.

Source: The authors.

The school unit in question belongs to the Diretoria Regional de Educação [Regional Education Directorate] (DRE) Butantã, in the municipality of São Paulo. Its location presents peculiarities in relation to the urban fabric of São Paulo. It is a borderline area between valued neighborhoods and working-class neighborhoods, which are characterized by irregular occupations and precarious urban infrastructure.

According to the Inequality Map, the district in which the school is located lacks essential services, such as health, social and cultural assistance, sports, and leisure facilities (Rede Nossa São Paulo, 2021). This reveals the significant socioeconomic disparity that, incidentally, is not an exceptional characteristic of the city of São Paulo when compared to other Brazilian metropolises (Santos; Silveira, 2001). Accordingly, expanding the geographical scale of analysis, the street that provides access to the school, located on top of a hill, marks a large division between territorial sets: (1) in front of the school there are middle and upper class buildings and gated communities; (2) behind the school there are blocks of self-built housing with no external finishing, precarious ventilation system, and separated by excessively narrow streets (alleys); and finally, (3) at the foot of the hill, masonry houses and small businesses that sell essential items and services.

According to data from Secretaria Municipal de Educação de São Paulo (SMESP) [Municipal Department of Education of São Paulo], in 2023, the school had a total of 778 students, most of them attending the early grades, split into two shifts, morning and afternoon (São Paulo, 2023). In terms of infrastructure, the school has a reading room, a computer lab, two sports courts, an outdoor recreation area, a playroom, a large, covered patio, a cafeteria, and restrooms for students and education professionals. At the time of the field research, all teachers had higher education degrees, had a room for study and meetings, a library with technical and literary books, as well as a dedicated area for eating and resting. The management team consisted of a principal, an assistant principal, and two pedagogical coordinators.

The 3rd grade class was taught in the morning session, from 7:00 AM to 12:00 PM, with six 45-minute classes per day. During the observation period, there were 31 students enrolled, with an average daily attendance of 28 students. It had one intern teacher giving support to the 12 non-literate children in the class, who followed distinct literacy and math activities from the others. The 5th grade class was taught in the afternoon session, from 1:30 PM to 6:30 PM, with six 45-minute classes, plus a break. It had only one teacher, with 26 students enrolled and an average attendance of 22 students per day during the observation period. Both classrooms had adequate furniture, were well-ventilated and illuminated, and, in addition to the board, they had cabinets for storing materials, a computer, a multimedia projector, and a screen. Textbooks on all subjects, children's literature books, school supplies, posters with topics covered, and student work, among other things were available in the classrooms. The school's Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica (Ideb) [Fundamental Education Development Index] in 2023 was 6.1, which is close to the national average (6.5) and the municipal average (6.2). Concerning Portuguese language learning in the early years, based on SAEB 2021 (Brasil, 2020, 2023), 70% of 5th grade students showed an adequate learning level against 18% at the basic level and 12% at the insufficient level. In the case of Mathematics, during the same period, 50% of them were at an adequate level against 31% at the basic level and 19% at the insufficient level. It is also noteworthy that the school, in the early years, presented an average age-grade distortion rate of 7.5%, the same as the national average (7.5%), with a higher concentration of students in this condition in the 5th grade (11.5%).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In both grades, class starts when the students enter the classroom, the environment is set up, and students go to their respective desks. The class ends when school materials and the environment are organized, teachers and students leave the classroom, and students wait for their guardians in the schoolyard. This spatiotemporal organization is largely determined by the school's institutional framework, as is the delimitation of meals and recess times, and the distribution of subjects in each class's timetable.

Preliminary activities to the didactic-academic dimension are conducted in the 3rd grade, and they consist of students jotting down the heading and routine, with the identification of the school subjects to be covered on that day, as well as specialist classes, meals and recess times, and additional activities under the responsibility of the class teacher and/or specialists. The initial activity in the 5th grade encompasses the didactic-academic dimension with oral presentations by randomly selected students each day about issues related to the Portuguese Language and Mathematics content being studied. Next, the 5th grade teacher explains the school routine for the day: list of "classroom activities", writes a short text about the content covered in the oral presentation on the board for students to copy, and/or indicates pages in the textbook for reading school content and solving and/or correcting exercises.

In the 3rd grade class, the lesson development stage is organized based on a sequence of activities that addresses subject content and may include various tasks performed by students, with different organizations (individually, in pairs, in small groups, for example) and within time limits set in the routine schedule. These activities primarily encompass the subjects of Portuguese Language, with focus on literacy, and Mathematics, while neglecting other subjects, such as Science. In these situations, the teacher makes use of several teaching devices: children's literature books, units and activities from the textbook, the teacher's oral presentation, followed by copying expository-didactic texts from the board, activities printed on loose sheets taken from instructional websites and blogs, and didactic audiovisuals being exhibited on social networks.

Two aspects stand out in the standard 3rd grade structure. Both completion and correction of activities in any of the three subjects focused on in the research were actions that strongly depended on the time spent by the students in carrying out the tasks. In this class, a large disparity was noticed between the time planned, recorded in the routine schedule, and the time actually spent to carry out the activities: there was a small group that quickly completed the activities, another group that took a little longer, and another group that required support and guidance and took longer to carry out the proposals. That was the moment that the students who had already finished the activity went to the teacher's desk, formed a line while

the others dedicated themselves to finishing the task; many of them remained idle after their notebooks were corrected. Some children with questions approached their classmates or the teacher or the intern. The collaborative attitude among the children was noteworthy, as they voluntarily helped one another during those moments.

Another characteristic is the high recurrence of printed activities related to Portuguese Language and Mathematics content, and the use of didactic audiovisuals for addressing Science content (solar system and planets, for instance), for reviewing concepts, information, and procedures recently covered in other subjects. The use of didactic devices was less often observed, such as dialogued exposition (observed on only two occasions), the use of the textbook (Portuguese Language and Mathematics, used three times), and experimentation (observed in a Mathematics activity on measurement systems). Didactic audiovisuals were used daily and occupied the time of the last class.

The recurrence of literacy activities in the 3rd grade, in this case, was the result of the presence of 12 non-literate children out of the 31 enrolled. These children carried out distinct activities, with strong emphasis on appropriation of the alphabetic writing system, numbers, and mathematical operations. The activities were mediated by the pedagogy intern, who, along with the teacher, developed their own materials and used the 2nd grade Portuguese Language textbook to meet the learning needs of these students.

What is noticeable in the 3rd grade is that the selection and sequencing of content of what should be taught was based on the teacher's decisions, which may be related to the body of knowledge she has built up during her school experience as a learner, in her initial and continuing education, and, mainly, in her professional development process. Textbooks do not seem enough to establish the content to be taught and learned in Portuguese Language and Mathematics, nor do the teaching materials provided by SMESP, hence the recurrence of researching activities on websites. For Science content, she resorts to the use of didactic audiovisuals, which are suitable for addressing the content of this subject, to the detriment of other materials that could support her teaching.

The low frequency with which this teacher carried out oral presentations of content or explanations indicates an emphasis on carrying out activities so that content is learned, with the students' actions becoming central in those moments. These characteristics constitute a weak framing of assessment criteria in the choices made by the 3rd grade teacher, who leaves the production of summaries, reinforcement of information, and systematization and memorization of procedures to the teaching devices used, particularly audiovisual teaching aids. This device favors the clear presentation of relevant content.

When it comes to considering the students' input when selecting what should be taught, it is also noteworthy that their participation in moments of oral content presentation is not valued. When prompted by the teacher via objective questions, the students answer them orally, but their answers are little or not explored at all, which could be noticed if the teacher made revisions, expansions, reformulations, or reiterations of aspects related to what they answered or commented on. We also did not observe a comparison between student responses and situations of collective correction. The expected answer is usually given by the teacher herself. These characteristics constitute a strong framing (control on the part of the teacher) in relation to teaching content during the observation period of the 3rd grade, since little or no space at all was noticed for student intervention in defining teaching objects.

In turn, in the 5th grade, the oral presentation of content-related questions of Portuguese Language and Mathematics by the students, in addition to revision, were used for assessing the students' appropriation of this content. It is worth highlighting that Science content or that of other subjects were never addressed at this stage of the class. Next, the students dedicated themselves to carrying out the activities indicated by the teacher, which could be accomplished individually, in pairs or trios, while encouraging a collaborative attitude among themselves. We also identified a specific stage dedicated to correcting activities that was carried out collectively and orally and subsequent written record of the correct answers, which could correspond to activities carried out on that day or on previous days – this applies to the classes that taught the three subjects monitored. That is when a recurrent use of textbooks and oral presentations of content was noticed, including the review of content already studied.

Those choices made by the 5th grade teacher show a strong framing of assessment criteria, which means that her choices contribute to highlighting what should be regarded as relevant content and how students should communicate what they learn – in other words, what is expected from them. In turn, both the selection of what should be taught and the content sequence in the 5th grade classes observed are tied to what is established in the adopted textbooks, the main teaching tool used in the classes. Both processes seem to count on little or no student input at all, since their prior knowledge or questions are not taken into account in these situations, or even in the choices the teacher makes, thus denoting a strong framing of selection and sequence of what should be taught, a characteristic similar to that identified in the 3rd grade.

Concerning the approach to school subject content, both classes put strong emphasis on activities related to the teaching of Portuguese Language and Mathematics, which can be seen in the class distribution timetables of teachers, and in the investment of teaching time in these subjects. In the 3rd grade, for instance, three and a half days of the school week were dedicated entirely to these subjects: two for Portuguese Language and one for Mathematics, and half a day for both subjects, in addition to the shared oral reading of literature books, which occurred virtually daily. During the period observed, Science occupied only one class hour. In the 5th grade, classes were sorted by subject and followed a different configuration, but the emphasis remains: three class hours are dedicated to the Geography, Science and History subjects, while seven class hours per week are dedicated to the Mathematics and Portuguese Language subjects, in addition to reading and writing practices that permeate the activities of other school subjects.

It is important to consider that the distribution of class hours per school subject in the RMESP was governed by Normative Instruction No. 20 from August 2024 (São Paulo, 2024), which established that a school week for the First Years of Fundamental Education comprises 30 class hours of 45 minutes each: seven class hours dedicated to Portuguese Language and seven class hours dedicated to Mathematics, three class hours dedicated to Science, three class hours dedicated to History, three class hours dedicated to Geography, two class hours dedicated to English Language, two class hours dedicated to Physical Education, and one class hour dedicated to Arts. In addition to these, the Reading Room and Space plus Digital Education have one class hour per week each; these are spaces where projects included in the SMESP's curriculum expansion are developed. Thus, the emphasis observed is largely justified by the regulations of the school system and may also be linked to the importance attributed to literacy, to knowing how to read and write, and to the acquisition of basic mathematical knowledge, which teachers deem necessary for continuing the studies. It is also important to remember that the school performance assessment systems (local, from SMESP itself, and national) for the early years, primarily focus on learning Portuguese Language and Mathematics, which should influence the choice of teachers.

Classroom time management follows distinct configurations in both grades. In the 3rd grade, up to 30 minutes are used for preliminary activities related to the academic-didactic dimension. Next, the sequence of activities begins and encompasses most of the time dedicated to teaching and learning, and may be interrupted by lunch break and recess, specialist classes, and curriculum expansion projects. The last activity of the school day mostly consisted of the exhibition of an educational audiovisual (mainly animations), as already mentioned, which introduces or revisits subject content (for instance, we observed audiovisuals explaining noun number and gender, punctuation usage, the solar system, among others). The pace of activity development seems to be determined by the students, since, on several occasions, the routine established was not followed based on the time taken by students to complete their tasks. Since Portuguese Language and Mathematics activities prevailed, we observed that the deviations from what the teacher had planned compromised the time allocated for addressing Science content even if they may show respect for the students' pace, for instance, by exposing them to comments on topics of this nature before or after the exhibition of audiovisuals.

These characteristics allow us to assume that pace is weak in the classes observed. At the end of the school day, the announcement of wrapping up didactic-academic activities was marked by the exhibition of one or more audiovisuals, which generated a scattered mood, with part of the class watching and another part organizing materials and the classroom, while walking around.

This situation tends to weaken the framing of evaluation criteria, since the teacher seems to attribute to these audiovisuals the role of highlighting and consolidating summaries of what is considered relevant about the topic covered in class. When the teacher announced the audiovisual, the children watched it (or not) and said goodbye to leave the class.

There is a certain centrality in the students' actions in how that time is managed, even though the teacher controls content selection and sequence, by deciding what should be taught and when. The pace of activities largely depends on how long students as a whole take to complete the activities, creating for those who complete their tasks quickly a free period, with no didactic-academic purpose – thus meaning that it is a weak pace.

In the 5th grade, the activity of random selection of and asking questions to students covered the first 30 minutes of the class, followed by the oral presentation on content and the completion of activities related to the content covered, which took an average of 60 minutes. The collective correction of activities lasted an average of 22 minutes. While activities were carried out, we observed that the time foreseen for completing the tasks exceeded that which was necessary for most of the students, who remained idle after they were done with the tasks and waited for the moment of correction. The teacher anticipated more time than necessary for the students to complete the activities, most of whom took less time to complete them. It is worth mentioning that the teacher took that time to constantly check the students' agendas and notebooks. In other words, a weak pace was also evident in the 5th grade classes observed.

Regarding the interaction between teacher and student in the 3rd grade, we noticed a distribution of roles and strategies. The teacher took on the role of introducing and presenting content, informing on, requesting, and verifying the activities contained in loose sheets or the textbook, and announcing the didactic audiovisuals, by means of oral explanation either accompanied or not by visual support of these materials projected on the board. Collective oral presentation sessions were disrupted by instances of indiscipline, which interrupted the interaction and diverted everyone's attention, and we also noticed students attempting to participate by introducing new topics or narrating everyday facts and events not always related to the topic being addressed, which demanded a great deal of effort from the teacher to regain everyone's attention and resume her presentation.

In the 3rd grade, for the most part, didactic activities were corrected individually: the children took their notebooks or books to the teacher's desk, formed a long and lively line and talked amongst themselves. This ritual of individual correction took up a significant amount of class time and served to control and assess each student's performance. The lack of moments for completing the activity or for collective correction, which would serve to connect recently and previously covered content or to indicate what is to be studied later, left a gap in the lessons. Such connections seemed to be the responsibility of the students and were not conducted by the teacher. As already mentioned, the description of the practice observed in the 3rd grade suggests that the framing of evaluation criteria is weak, which differs from what was observed in the 5th grade class.

Even with the 5th graders, although the teacher largely focused on conveying knowledge via oral explanations, copying selected expository texts, assessing performance in activities, and conducting correction sessions, we observed the use of some distinct strategies based on the school content to be covered. An example of this was the lessons focused on mathematical operations and geometry. For the mathematical operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division), students were selected to demonstrate the calculations performed on the board, while being attentively observed by the whole class, or, in the initial moments of the lessons, when the students themselves orally reviewed recently learned content. For the introduction of geometry content, the handling of geometric solids was used for identifying, characterizing, and differentiating those solids provided by the teacher in the classroom. During oral explanations of content in classes of those three subjects, it was common for the teacher to begin sentences and expect the students to complete them. Throughout the classes, there was an intense activity of students handing in their agendas to the teacher, who checked and returned them, sometimes with notes to the parents/guardians (especially when students did not do well in the random selection process in the beginning of class). Another frequent action was the teacher checking the activities done in the notebook and textbook.

The search for clear evaluation criteria was carried out by constantly repeating the content covered in class and carefully jotting down the learning path developed, in the case of 5th graders, notably in the notebook – particularly when it comes to Portuguese Language and Mathematics classes, which occupied more time during the week. Also, the rigorous specification of how these records should be made in the students' materials can assist in clarifying the evaluation criteria. These characteristics show that, in her practice, the 5th grade teacher invests considerable effort in specifying what needs to be learned in each class and what she expects from the students; in other words, establishing a strong framing of assessment criteria.

In summary, the analysis of the results relating to the 3rd and 5th grade classes, considering the favorable practice model and according to the authors mentioned, indicates that teachers control content selection for both classes, with no negotiation with students, which implies rigid boundaries between their prior knowledge and school knowledge. Teachers also control content sequence with no interference from the students, thus indicating that they may not give consideration enough to any need to return to previously addressed concepts.

Pace is mostly under the students' control, but the time allotted for activities does not seem to be geared towards developing cognitively challenging proposals, for most 5th graders and for a group of 3rd graders, thus leaving them with idle time after the activities are completed.

Concerning assessment criteria, there is a difference between what happens in the 5th grade class, where relevant content is clearly stated by the teacher, particularly regarding Portuguese Language and Mathematics classes, but at a reduced level of demand (which does not seem to significantly explore the possibilities of students who do not have major difficulties), and in the 3rd grade class, where criteria are not directly established, leaving it to the students to infer what is relevant to be learned or not, by means of activities and contact with audiovisual materials.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The curriculum and pedagogical choices of the two teachers observed in the research come close to what the authors mentioned earlier have defined as a model of pedagogical practice that favors the learning of all students in the same class; but we also highlight points of divergence, or peculiarities of the reality observed that, in a way, challenge that model.

Thus, concerning the similarities, during the period researchers were in the school, the teachers control content selection and sequence established in the classes observed, with no opening for student interference in their approach to content teaching and sequence. According to the model mentioned above, this control should indeed belong to the teacher. However, we recommended that changes be allowed to be made to content selection and/or sequence, considering specific interests and/or needs of students. We believe that, even if it does not fully correspond to the favorable pedagogical practice model, this is a positive approach, and we acknowledge that the class observation period may not have been long enough to reveal the consideration of what the students indicate.

We also found that pace, in a way, comes close to this model: the control over the time required for students to approach school knowledge is loosely defined by the teachers, thus configuring a weak framing of pace, which could indicate consideration of students' different learning paces. However, we question whether this characteristic results from the prioritization that teachers give to caring for different learning paces or whether it responds more directly to the time they need to manage the classroom and organize teaching work. Thus, we ask ourselves whether the extended time allocated, which was far longer than that which seems to be necessary for most students, corresponds to welcoming those who have more difficulties or whether it responds to what teachers need to do in a constantly intensifying work routine, such as checking students' notebooks and agendas or other tasks.

We are also struck by the fact that, apparently, what is demanded from students during these class periods, when time is more flexible, does not seem to present great intellectual challenges for most of them, since they finish what has been proposed to them very quickly. Accordingly, and attempting to outline a pedagogical practice model that is interesting for all students to learn, we emphasize the relevance of employing the qualification of teaching choices that results in a weak framing of pace.

Concerning evaluation criteria, the 5th grade teacher reveals that her practice also comes close to the model mentioned above. There is a clear intention to highlight what constitutes relevant content in her classes – by producing summaries, revisiting the content that has been learned on a daily basis, especially during Portuguese Language and Mathematics classes (with more time dedicated to these subjects), taking care of correcting the activities carried out in class and at home – and what she expects from the students when they complete the tasks presented to them. For the authors who have been developing this model, this is a very important characteristic of pedagogical practice because it offers students the possibility of understanding and monitoring their progress towards acquiring school knowledge, as well as recognizing what they have already learned, and what they still need to learn.

In the case of the 3rd grade teacher, clear assessment criteria are not apparent in the interactions observed in the classes of the three subjects, thus leading us to question how clear she herself is about what constitutes relevant content and what she expects from her students in her classes.

Based on these results, some questions point to possible explanations, all of them deserving attention: do recently implemented curriculum documents, in the case of the RME, clearly state to teachers what is relevant to be taught and learned, and what students are expected to communicate about what they have been learning? Are these weaknesses observed related in some way to gaps in the early training of teachers that may hinder their teaching choices? Has continuing education promoted the possibility of deepening knowledge relevant to teaching and contributing to a more interesting curriculum and pedagogical choices that support students in their learning process?

Thus, considerations are outlined regarding the pedagogical model stated in the research cited by Hoadley (2018), rooted in the reality observed in both classes. Although some of the relevant characteristics of this model are observed in the teachers' pedagogical practices, we identified other aspects that deserve attention in the pursuit of consolidating learning that is compatible with the students' potential and the curriculum intended to be developed at this stage of elementary education. Emphasis can be placed on the selection and sequence adopted in classes: although partially compatible with the model mentioned above, reflection is warranted on how the students' interests and knowledge can gain greater weight in defining the selection and sequence of knowledge addressed in the classes. According to Bernstein's terms, this would require greatly weakening the framing of teacher-student relations. This is an essential element for building dialogue between cultures in the classroom and is a condition for meaningful learning. Regarding pace, there is the need for finding ways to not only make the time allocated for students to complete activities more flexible, but also to improve its quality so as not to lose sight of cognitive challenges. In this case, although framing is weak in defining the time allocated for tasks, the challenge seems to lie in defining the type of activity and maintaining the students' state of engagement with the school knowledge produced in class.

Concerning classification criteria, we restated the relevance that they be very clearly defined by the teachers, so that students understand what is expected from them and what is essential for them to learn in class. Without this, they will hardly be able to synthesize what they learn, which hinders the development of relational thinking.

Another point that deserves further research concerns the balance when treating the different subjects in the school curriculum, particularly in the early years of elementary education. Perhaps the emphasis on Portuguese language and mathematics can be maintained, but by resorting to strategies that weaken the boundaries with other subjects, for instance, in working with texts that mobilize knowledge of natural sciences, history, geography etc.

It should also be mentioned that the impact of the conditions arising from the context of the pandemic on teaching practices – a period of undeniable difficulties in ensuring access for all students to school education and the quality of education opportunities offered – deserves further research. Apparently, these conditions specific to the post-pandemic context did not significantly influence the curriculum and didactic choices of both teachers, since the content selection and sequence implemented by them were not significantly based on the students' prior knowledge or their learning pace and needs. This configuration is not surprising if,

for instance, one considers the centrality of results and certain prioritized subjects in the largely standardized assessments adopted in Brazilian education policies since the 1990s. Among other intriguing questions, it is worth reflecting on how those practices, so deeply rooted in school education, are reverberating with the students after everything that was experienced during the pandemic period.

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Authors contribution

CVAG: Conceptualization (idealization of the study, definition of questions and objectives); Methodology (methodological design of the research); Data management (management of data and metadata, maintenance of data for initial and subsequent use); Data collection (execution of experiments and application of data collection procedures, such as forms/interviews, for example); Data analysis (interpretation of results and attribution of meaning based on pre-determined theoretical frameworks); Fundraising (seeking financial resources); Project administration (coordination); Validation (responsibility for evaluating the reproducibility of the research); Visual preparation of data (visual organization, preparation of tables, charts and other graphic elements); Writing (original draft); Revision (critical review of the original manuscript and approval of the version to be submitted). CLV: Conceptualization (idealization of the study, definition of questions and objectives), Methodology (methodological design of the research), Data collection (execution of experiments and application of data collection procedures, such as forms/interviews, for example), Data analysis (interpretation of results and attribution of meaning based on pre-determined theoretical frameworks), Validation (responsibility for evaluating the reproducibility of the research), Visual preparation of data (visual organization, preparation of tables, charts and other graphic elements), Writing (drafting the original manuscript), Revision (critical review of the original manuscript and approval of the version to be submitted). DF: Conceptualization (idealization of the study, definition of questions and objectives), Methodology (methodological design of the research), Data collection (execution of experiments and application of data collection procedures, such as forms/interviews, for example), Data analysis (interpretation of results and attribution of meaning based on pre-determined theoretical frameworks), Validation (responsibility for evaluating the reproducibility of the research), Visual preparation of data (visual organization, preparation of tables, charts and other graphic elements), Writing (drafting the original manuscript), Revision (critical review of the original manuscript and approval of the version to be submitted).

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