

Criteria Used by Teachers in Brazilian Public Elementary Schools in the Process of Textbook Selection

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Abstract: This paper reports the results of research which analyzed the constitutive elements of the assessment process performed by teachers in selecting textbooks available through the Brazilian National Programme of Textbooks (PNLD). The starting point of the research was the empirical confirmation of a significant number of teachers pointing out difficulties in analyzing the books available for selection by their schools. On the other hand, the teachers also criticized the books being used, highlighting their inadequacy for their work and the students' needs. The teachers collaborated with the investigations performed throughout the last few years, providing their views on their options of use and *non-use* of the materials chosen and received from the PNLD. The participant teachers are from public elementary schools, located in both urban and rural areas.

Keywords: textbook assessment, textbook selection, Brazilian National Programme of Textbooks (PNLD), teacher education

The organization of the educational system in Brazil is based on the articulation of three levels: federal, state, and municipal. Public and curricular policies emanate from these three levels, as well as the creation and maintenance of public schools – the first years of elementary school are predominantly supported by the municipal level (1st to 5th grades); the final grades of elementary school (6th to 9th) and high school (10th to 12th grades) are predominantly supported by the states; with professional educational and university courses predominantly supported by the Federal government.

The restructuring of the Brazilian educational system, initiated three decades ago, still defines goals and actions today. The Ministry of Education co-ordinated the elaboration of the Decennial Plan of Education (1993–2003), in which the government adopted the perspectives of equity, quality and systematic evaluation for the system. In 1996, Federal Act 9.394 restructured the educational system. As of that moment, the Brazilian government formulated a set of guidelines to define the curricular orientation and the basic (minimum) contents for the educational system in the country. However, it also allowed for the flexibility of the curricular components through the guidelines formulated by the state and municipal systems.

This structure must be taken into consideration even in the case of public policies related to textbooks, as it implies centralized and local actions. The existence of a National Programme of Textbooks (PNLD), for which the Ministry of Education is responsible, is marked by the relationships between unity and diversity, as well as national and local, which are expressed in the different facets of the Programme.

- 10 This programme has existed since 1985 and its main purpose is to provide textbooks to children and adolescents who study in Brazilian public schools. The programme includes the following features: a centralized procedure for the assessment of textbooks, which should be submitted by the commercial publishers, based on previously defined criteria; a Textbook Guideline, to inform the results of the assessment procedure to schools and teachers; a local process in the schools to select textbooks; and a centralized purchase process to acquire textbooks and ship the materials to the schools.

In order to start the analysis, it is first necessary to understand the local context, throwing some light on some aspects of Brazilian society. Brazil is a very large country, geographically, with an estimated population of 200 million inhabitants, distributed across the country in large cities – such as São Paulo – as well as in smaller towns with less than one thousand inhabitants. It is a country which has highly industrialized areas (manufacturing electronic devices, cars, agro-industrial products, fishing industry, etc.) and areas with rural farmers, local fishermen, and populations living off of hunting and gathering activities, and other subsistence activities.

Thus, it is common to say that Brazil is *one and many countries*. Further information will help illustrate the meaning of this expression, so that the implications for the production of textbooks may be analyzed. The Brazilian population, in the different areas, presents diverse origins and different local cultures. This is the result of the presence of native populations and populations who moved to the country as slaves or immigrants (African, European and Asian) in the different stages of the country's history.

The official encouragement of European immigration to Brazil in the 19th century (Act of Lands of 1850) – with the prospect of acquiring lands or working on the farms through partnerships – brought groups of Germans, Italians, Polish, and Ukrainians, among others. During the 20th century, other groups, such as the Japanese, Arabs, Israelis, Turkish, Mozambicans, Angolans, Koreans, and many others continued to come to the country, configuring the absolutely culturally diverse set that compounds the Brazilian population today. Therefore, any question related to identity, in the Brazilian case, must be discussed based on the understanding that we “are diverse”.

In fact, this diversity is a great challenge when deliberating and analyzing textbooks policies. It is not possible, however, to understand the Brazilian educational programs and daily life at schools without investigating the roots of economic and social differences and inequalities. From this perspective, it is necessary to take culture as a resource for teaching contents, as a way to approach diversity, while it is simultaneously equally necessary to be aware of what Paulo Freire (1987) calls the need for the formation of critical consciousness, which allows the subject to situate and comprehend themselves in the world. These two aspects are challenges that should, and must, be embraced by school education in Brazil.

When transposing these diversity issues onto the educational sphere, we are faced with the fact that the Federal government is responsible for defining the educational objectives for the entire population, and expressing them in contents

and methodological proposals which should incorporate diversity in the formulation of public policies. Furthermore, the authors and publishers of textbooks, as well as textbooks evaluators and educators, should take these aspects into consideration on a daily basis. In this context, the National Programme of Textbooks (PNLD) – which provides free distribution of textbooks for all the students in public schools for the twelve years of study – can be not only understood as a question of financial resources, but also one of an ethical and didactical nature.

In the PNLD context, there are some questions to be investigated: How do teachers make their choices? What criteria are used in the selection of a textbook for their students? Do teachers consider diversity and the local culture when making their selection? Are there specific procedures or strategies developed by schools to assist in the selection process?

In order to understand and analyze these questions, some specific studies are being developed, aiming at: a) understanding the criteria used by elementary schools' teachers to select textbooks; and b) analyzing the relationship between teachers' selection criteria and the criteria used by experts of the Brazilian National Programme of Textbooks. The issues surrounding the evaluation and selection of textbooks were defined, based on the results of investigations carried out in recent years in urban and rural public schools, in which teachers pointed out difficulties in the analysis of the textbooks available for selection. This text will present the theoretical references, methodologies, and some of the results obtained by these studies.

1 Theoretical approaches

Finding a theoretical approach which makes reference to the presence of textbooks in the classrooms is a challenge for educational research. However, some studies developed by Núcleo de Pesquisa em Publicações Didáticas (NPPD/UFPR) aim to analyze the relationship between teachers, students, and textbooks. The project's research has been particularly focused on understanding the following aspects: Textbooks and other didactic materials; Criteria used by teachers in selecting textbooks; Textbooks in the classrooms; Textbook production.

All the studies developed within the NPPD/UFPR work within the areas of both general and specific didactics (social sciences, natural sciences, languages). The adoption of this methodological perspective adds an extra challenge, as the dialogue between these areas is not common in developing research on textbooks in Brazil. Some concepts have been used as references for the studies, as presented next: the textbook as an object of school culture; the textbook as a market product; and the textbook as an artifact of school life.

The textbook is *an object of school culture* (Forquin, 1993, p. 167), a “set of cognitive and symbolic contents which are selected, organized, ‘normalized’, ‘routinized’, under the effect of the imperatives of didactics, and thereby constitutes the object of a deliberate transmission within the school context.” Its content expresses

12 the results of a process of natural selection in which the meanings of scholarization, and the contents considered relevant to be taught, are both defined. Therefore, the textbooks express what we consider valuable enough to transmit to the new generations, especially in regard to scientific knowledge, underlining the understanding of science as a historical and social construction.

However, as was highlighted by Juliá (2001), school culture also includes a set of practices that allow for the *transmission* of this knowledge, and the incorporation of these behaviours. Within this perspective, the concept of *school culture* enables researchers to consider the textbook as an artifact of this culture, emphasizing the comprehension of not only the scientific knowledge transmitted, but also of the forms of teaching and learning favoured at a certain time. Furthermore, it is also important to be aware of the values – and therefore the social and cultural choices – that drive the educational proposals, which aim to transmit part of the culture considered relevant to the new generation.

An estimated 50 million students in Brazil use the textbooks received through the National Programme, thereby building their social values on this foundation. Therefore, studies based on the concept of school culture could contribute to the understanding of themes such as the contents presented, the relationships with the curriculum, and the contribution of the textbooks in the construction of identities, among other things. The purpose of these studies is to analyze the relationships that comprise the space of cultural and social production into which textbooks are inserted, so as to highlight their role as an expression or materialization of the culture that the school should be transmitting and preserving.

The second reference is supported by the analysis through a political-economic perspective, allowing for the understanding of textbook production through the perspective of macro-structural relationships. Thus, the textbooks may be understood as results of actions that involve not only the authors, but also the publishers who produce and commercialize the books, as well as the consumers. In the case of Brazil, there is currently a predominance of large international capital groups, with few Brazilian publishers remaining. Small publishers – important for proposing books with an alternative didactic point of view – have almost entirely been closed down or bought up by other larger publishers, which included the Spanish groups during the 1990s.

In a country like Brazil, where the number of readers is admittedly low, the Federal Government's presence as a larger consumer of textbooks guarantees the circulation of financial resources that, undoubtedly, support the existence and revenue of many publishers. Every year, the National Programme spends about one billion dollars purchasing textbooks for elementary education that will then be distributed in public schools throughout the country.

The third theoretical perspective is related to perhaps the most complex facet of textbooks: their existence *in school life*. It is imperative, for this perspective, to highlight the concept of the *culture of school* (Forquin 1993, 167) as “a social world”

with its own characteristics, its own pace and rituals, languages and imagination, its own modes of regulation, and forms of production. The textbook, as an artifact of school culture, is borrowed by the culture of school, and begins to comprise the set of elements which then constitute school life.

According to this point of view, the content of school experience is neither the same in all societies, nor is it the same in all schools. This content is transmitted in a real and complex process that must be understood in greater depth by educational research. As a consequence, qualitative research and especially ethnographic studies are favoured, using interviews and participant observations, as well as other instruments that make it possible “to know the forms of material existence of the school, and to emphasize the space in which the individuals experience, reproduce, know, and transform school reality” (Ezpeleta & Rockwell, 1989, s. 23).

The definitions based on the school subjects’ actions are established within this social space – in everyday life – especially by the teachers and students. The studies with this approach are still in their infancy, according to the literature (Choppin, 2004; Fernández, 2005; Garcia, 2007; Valls, 2009). For the aforementioned authors, it is necessary to develop in depth the studies focused on the presence of textbooks in the classroom.

In this perspective, the Brazilian scenario presents some specific questions which should be investigated. How do schools and teachers choose the textbooks? How do the teachers and students use the textbooks in the classes? What is the meaning of their content for the populations of the different Brazilian regions? It is necessary to analyze how the Brazilian programme affects the production of textbooks available for teachers’ selection (annually since 1990) in order to understand the relationships between textbooks, schools, teachers, and students, and to answer questions about the selection process.

2 The Brazilian Programme of Textbooks (PNLD): historical elements, rules and criteria

Brazilian textbooks have earned attention from national governments for a long time. In the last century, more actions and policies related to the distribution of textbooks were co-ordinated by the Federal Government. However, it was only in 1985 that the National Programme of Textbooks (PNLD) was initiated – this designation has been maintained until today –, with the goal of universalizing the distribution of textbooks to all public school students in all school subjects.

In 1993, the textbook evaluation began to be understood as an essential element of the Programme. The Brazilian government established a committee of experts in charge of evaluating the quality of the textbooks most requested by teachers, as well as establishing general evaluation criteria. This decision has had a great influence on Brazilian textbooks, and the evaluation process developed in the last two

14 decades has produced expressive changes in textbook contents and design. In 1996, an educational reform changed the national curriculum and opened up room for new discussions on the use of textbooks, and the cognitive and ideological contents transmitted by them.

The evaluation group of the Programme is comprised of education experts who were invited by the Ministry of Education, and the results of the assessment process are released in a Guideline published by the Federal Government. Teachers and public schools can select textbooks which were previously approved by the experts and included in the national Guidelines. Every year, the assessment groups are responsible for analyzing books produced by commercial editors. This is done in accordance with the guidelines given through Federal Edicts; the evaluators assess the books based on specific criteria defined in these official documents.

Thus, it is possible to say that the current production of textbooks used by public schools in Brazil is a strongly controlled process, with parameters defined by the State. In the last two decades, the National Programme has slowly produced changes in Brazilian textbooks, creating an interesting model: enforcing general guidelines to be followed, while at the same time avoiding the problem of “one textbook for all”, which is unacceptable in Brazilian school culture nowadays. In this perspective, a gradual process of criteria production by the National Programme of Textbooks has taken place with the support of the universities. More recently, professionals with experience in elementary and high schools classrooms have been invited to comprise such teams.

After every new evaluation process, the criteria are published in the Edicts of the Ministry of Education, aiming to advise the publishers on how to elaborate and present textbooks. These indicators are translated into items by the official evaluation experts, composing tables relating to the following aspects: contents, teaching methodology, graphic design and quality, and citizenship construction. There are eliminatory and classificatory criteria. These criteria are disclosed to public school teachers in the Textbooks Programme Guidelines, aiming to help navigate the choice of titles (available at <http://www.fnde.gov.br/index.php/pnld-guia-do-livro-didatico>).

Some criteria are used to include or exclude textbooks in the Guidelines: prejudice manifestations, conceptual mistakes or discrepancies in the theoretical proposal announced by the author, and its actual development in the student’s book. The Textbooks Programme Guidelines highlight the evaluators’ concerns with the specific criteria about human rights, the construction of citizenship and respect to diversity, amongst others, and transport these analyses to the teachers and into the schools.

Regarding contents and methodologies, the evaluators present considerations on specific concepts of science used by the authors in each subject. The methodological choices are usually analyzed, showing points of agreement and points of disagreement with the National Curricular Parameters. The experts try to present evidence to point out the best quality and also to point to the problems that the team encountered in each textbook.

3 Methodological choices

As previously mentioned in the theoretical references section, some research developed within the NPPD/UFPR face a challenge: to understand how textbooks are included in classroom life, and how they affect the organization of teaching and learning. This general purpose can be divided into specific objectives, which have been pointing the way for qualitative approaches in “field research” and “ethnographic studies”.

According to Wolcott (1991, p. 21), many researchers believe that “field study” and “ethnography” are “labels for the same thing”. However, we agree with Wolcott’s position in that “they are related but are not the same”. It is possible to point out, using Wolcott’s words, some common elements and one essential difference of the two methodologies:

Field study and ethnography draw upon the three techniques basic to all field-oriented research: experiencing, enquiring, and examining. What distinguishes between them is that anyone doing ethnography makes a claim not only about procedures, but also that the result will be ethnography. Ethnography is the end product for the culturally focused description and interpretation that characterize anthropological fieldwork. (Wolcott, 1991, p. 21)

According to this perspective, ethnographic studies should be understood as field studies “plus something special” in the nature of their development and outcomes. Participant observation is the privileged procedure and the concept of culture is essential to the inquiry of the initial research questions, as well as to the analysis of the data produced by the researcher through their empirical work.

In an attempt to understand what happens in schools’ daily life and the innumerable experiences regarding schooling, both methodologies – field studies and ethnographic studies – are used in the research developed by the NPPD/UFPR. The strongest influence comes from Mexico, especially from the academic production developed at the Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas – DIE (Educational Research Department), some of which under the co-ordination of Dr. Elsie Rockwell.

The concept of everyday life produced by Agnes Heller has developed elaborate theoretical and methodological principles to support ethnographic studies in the Mexican educational context, associating sociology and history with an anthropological point of view. Thus, studies developed *in* schools are encouraged, especially because “schools are certainly not the same throughout the capitalist world, nor are they among the Latin American countries” (Ezpeleta & Rockwell, 1989, p. 11). Although we recognize the existence of laws and structures in capitalist society, schools exist in the diversity and differentiation of material historic reality; and we must understand this reality to make new practices possible.

It is relevant to remember the centrality of the concept of culture, an essential tool in understanding how the school processes are constructed, as well as understanding their meanings to the subjects who make up the social world that we call

16 *school*. However, it is not sufficient to explain just the internal processes and meanings which are produced by the school.

This type of research – supported historical materialism – also implies the reconstruction of other processes linked to power, ideological domination and knowledge production, in a society marked by social inequality (Ezpeleta & Rockwell, 1989, p. 44). In countries like Mexico or Brazil, many educational researchers want more than to just study cultural processes as symbolic systems and interpret their meanings. They expect to clarify the relationships between the school, society, and the State; in order to do that, they must use some specific concepts of culture.

This is the direction of the research developed under the co-ordination of the NPPD/UFPR, the results of which will be partially analyzed in the next section. The concept of culture elaborated by Raymond Williams (2003) was chosen in order to support the studies performed *in schools*. This concept allows for the examination of relationships as derived from human actions, while at the same time acknowledging the existence of pressures and limitations on them. This perspective allows for the analysis of social relationships – and, therefore, of relationships produced by and in the school – as historically derived from the dialectics between the structure and action of the subjects (Schmidt & Garcia, 2008, p. 39).

The methodological resources applied featured questionnaires and interviews developed with teachers working in different grades of elementary and high school (Garcia, Garcia, & Pivovar, 2007; Silva & Garcia, 2010); participant observation was sometimes used as the main fieldwork strategy and sometimes as a complementary one (Chaves & Garcia, 2011); activities developed in courses for teachers' education were used to discuss the theme and to collect information about the textbook selection (Garcia, 2007); finally, some studies featured interviews made with the textbooks "in hands" as an additional resource (Talamini & Garcia, 2008; Garcia & Maciel, 2011).

This methodological option has offered a rich and challenging possibility for studying the presence of textbooks in classrooms in Brazil, as well as helping understand and explain the relationships established by schools, teachers, and students using this *complex object* as an artifact of the school culture. In this article, the results of the studies that focused on the textbooks' evaluation and their selection by teachers were particularly favoured. The different studies analyzed saw the participation of 140 teachers who work in elementary schools, and 60 teachers who work in high schools. Empirical data were produced using interviews and questionnaires as main procedures in the fieldwork.

4 Teachers and their criteria in assessing textbooks: a synthesis based on some studies

This section presents some of the results obtained by the set of researches developed by the NPPD/UFPR in the last years. The elements presented next characterize

how teachers analyze and select textbooks, highlighting what they consider to be important for their work.

4.1 How do teachers make their choices?

As previously mentioned, teachers in Brazilian public schools are able to choose textbooks to use in their classrooms, based on a selection of books that are previously approved by experts who were invited by the Ministry of Education to comprise an evaluation group. The Federal Government purchases the textbooks chosen by the teachers with public financial resources, and distributes the materials for all the students of public schools.

The PNLD proposes that teachers get involved in the textbooks selection process, which as a matter of fact happens in some schools. However, the schools do not have homogenous organization standards when analyzing and defining the books which will be purchased, as shown by some interviews:

The book was chosen by the school teachers. We had a meeting and reached a consensus (A, Elementary School teacher, 2008).

The school pedagogue called me to see if I agreed with the book that the colleagues had chosen. She showed it to me, I had a look at it, and agreed with the choice, as I am new in the school (M, Elementary School teacher).

I did not participate in the choice of the textbook, because my school is too far away (Elementary School teacher at a countryside school, 2012).

Answers like these were frequent, indicating the existence of similar practices in different schools and educational systems. The participating observation contributed to highlight the different ways through which the selection process is performed, which does not always include the participation of teachers. The research verified that there are no specific meetings in most of the cases; the teachers meet up during the day – during the break, for example – and exchange ideas about the books they know or that are available for assessment. In some rural schools, teachers reported they have not been a part of the selection process, which was performed by technical personnel from the education administrative sectors.

The research only observed a more detailed assessment of books sent by the publishing companies in a few situations. The analysis guided by specific technical criteria was rarely verified. In one of the locations where the research was performed, the teachers organized themselves into groups according to the disciplines, in order to develop formative activities. In this case, it was possible to observe that the discussion was carried out in a wider way, using more precise technical criteria:

The choice was made by the teachers after a course about textbooks, which was followed by an analysis conducted at the school with the pedagogues, who sent the forms to the Ministry of Education (R, High School teacher, 2008).

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The book was chosen through heated debates with the local group of teachers. Afterwards, the school filled in the form and sent it to the Ministry of Education (L, Elementary School teacher, 2008).

There were debates among the teachers, but I lost the argument, as I did not want the book which was chosen (L., Elementary School teacher, 2008).

In situations like these, the time destined to debate the theme is bigger. Because the meetings gather a group of teachers of one specific discipline, the discussions are centred on didactical and methodological issues – such as the objectives of the discipline in the local curriculum, the teaching contents, and the quality of the texts, and of the activities proposed by the textbook. The available books are examined by the teachers, who look for the material which is closest to the local curricular proposal. Even when there is no consensus about the choice, a situation like this provides the teachers with the presentation of the selection criteria, which means the analysis becomes a formative process.

Therefore, the results regarding the selection process of textbooks can be presented according to three situations: a) a situation in which the teachers were actually involved, discussing and proposing alternatives; b) a situation with a low degree of participation, due to strict deadlines or low interaction among teachers; c) a situation in which teachers do not participate at all, leaving the textbook choice to other professionals.

4.2 Elements favoured by teachers in their analysis

Teachers of the first grades of elementary school showed that their choices are more oriented towards general criteria, such as the size of the texts or their vocabulary, even when selecting history or geography textbooks. This situation is expressed by some of the collaborators, in reference to the history textbook for initial grades:

I choose a book to use not just for the history class, but also for the Portuguese lessons, as we can then read and orally interpret what the book is presenting (AL, Elementary School teacher, 2010).

I try to choose a book which helps me illustrate the contents. I analyze the texts and illustrations, and avoid the ones that have texts which are too long, and difficult language, which needs then to be “translated” by the teacher (A, Elementary School teacher, 2010)

Issues linked to specific concepts, themes or methodologies in general were not raised by the analyzed group. It is relevant to note that many initial grades’ teachers in Brazil have a general formation in pedagogy, and they reported having difficulties in assessing books about specific contents, as they are not specialists in these subjects.

Teachers who work with the final grades of elementary and high schools – who are specialists in one subject (such as history or physics) –, however, look more carefully at the concepts and the approach used by each author, as well as considering the general criteria. Specific methodological strategies – such as the use of documents to teach history, or the use of experiments to teach sciences – were highlighted by the teachers, coinciding with the criteria used by the official evaluators.

Both generalist and specialist teachers reported that it is important to compare the textbook proposal with the local curriculum. Although looking for a similar proposal, the teachers affirm that it is always complicated to connect their class programs with the textbook organization. This is shown in the interviews:

The contents approached in the books do not “fit” the curriculum (AB, Elementary School teacher, 2010).

Even when we choose the books, there are still difficulties when relating the proposal to the school programme and the municipal guidelines (N, Elementary School teacher, 2008).

The criteria relating to the presence of prejudice or stereotypes, known as the criteria for citizenship construction, were rarely remembered by the teachers of both groups. Although it is considered an exclusion criterion in the National Programme, it is not possible to assume that the textbooks approved in the Guidelines no longer present this type of problem. Research conducted by the NPPD/UFPR (Garcia & Maciel, 2011) point out that images and texts which potentially lead to linguistic and ethnical prejudice can still be found in textbooks approved by the Programme, despite the evaluation process.

Image quality, text level, and activity types were frequently pointed out by teachers of the two groups. Most of them considered the texts – in all textbooks – inappropriate when taking into consideration the level of the students. Thus, despite the evaluation processes, there are not many choices for the teachers: most authors use very similar models in presenting the different contents in a “didactic form”.

4.3 What is the reference used by teachers in selecting a textbook?

The set of researches developed showed relevant issues on the processes which constitute the Brazilian National Programme. Although the books’ official evaluation is public, and is available for consultation by the teachers, the research verified that the choice in the schools is still guided by other referential criteria.

The first criterion to be highlighted is the experience. Most of the teachers in both groups stated that sometimes their choice is guided by the experience they have had with a certain textbook in previous years – a tendency towards reproduction in their choices. Many teachers prefer a known textbook that has already been used in another situation. In a group of 13 specialist teachers, seven pointed out that they

20 face difficulties when using the textbook for the first time and, therefore, prefer sticking to their previous choices.

Beginning teachers frequently reported that they follow the choices made by older or more experienced colleagues from the same school. In some schools, discussions about the textbooks were observed, including the analysis of the books provided by the publishers. But for the most part, teachers reported that choices are made very quickly in order to meet deadlines established by the Ministry of Education, which limits the possibilities to discuss the subject with colleagues or conduct a deeper analysis of the books offered. Considering the limitations imposed by the deadlines or the difficulty of access to the books, the teachers understand that the experience is a criterion which may contribute to making a better choice.

Perhaps this aspect can help explain another result shown in the research: only a few teachers reported that their choices are supported by the official evaluation. Printed copies of the Guidelines with the criteria and evaluation results have been sent to all public schools, and nowadays the Guidelines are also available at the PNLD webpage. However, most of the teachers say they do not use the Guidelines to make their choices, reinforcing the fact that the opinion of the evaluation experts is not considered a reference when analyzing the books. As a consequence, the best textbook according to the National Programme is sometimes the worst one from the teachers' perspective. This phenomenon has already been verified, but it needs to be better understood by educational research.

A second criterion used by teachers is the priority of one curricular component over the others. Some teachers of the initial grades of elementary school (1st–5th grades) who participated in the research said that they first select the reading and writing textbooks, and then look for textbooks for other disciplines in the same collection. This group of teachers considers history, geography, and sciences to be somewhat less important for the students at this school level. This pattern presented by some teachers can partially be justified by the municipal, national, and international examinations – such as the Pisa –, which have been focusing on the assessment of native language and mathematics skills. This reinforces a model which already existed in the Brazilian school culture – as well as in other countries – one which favours these two fields of knowledge over others.

The researches verified the existence of such practices, even though the contents of other disciplines are also present in the Brazilian curricular proposals. This selection model sees the choice of textbooks based on their belonging to a certain book collection, rather than being based on the specific proposal for a particular school subject. Despite the efforts of researchers from the fields of history, geography, physics, in discussing proposals and ideas to improve the quality of the textbooks of these disciplines, teachers still choose them based on their collections, and not on content.

This preference for collections can also be explained by the fact that teachers of the initial grades teach all school subjects (Portuguese, mathematics, sciences, history, and geography). Therefore, the teachers choose the textbooks they consid-

er adequate to teach reading and writing – which is understood by them as a more complex task, demanding stronger support material – and, hence, choose the other titles from the same collection.

However, the researchers were also able to verify that some of the teachers choose the textbooks independently of the collection they belong to. This form of choice was observed in teachers who had had the opportunity to develop continuing education activities on specific contents, which enabled them to feel more prepared to identify the characteristics of a good textbook for each of the specific school disciplines.

5 Final considerations

Based on the research results, it is possible to emphasize some issues to be discussed in future investigations, and in teachers' education activities in Brazil. First, it is necessary to develop new studies on the criteria used by teachers in different situations, explaining the processes in regard to their formation, experiences, the level of the school where they teach, and the school location, amongst others.

Second, it is necessary to propose some specific activities on textbooks for teachers' education programs. Besides these specific courses, we suggest the production of materials in collaboration with the universities and schools. The aim behind this idea is to construct didactical and epistemological knowledge that could guide teachers' actions, helping to select textbooks in a more grounded way.

Finally, if we want elementary school teachers to use more specific and appropriate criteria to select textbooks, the universities must find new ways of providing and conducting teachers' education courses, based on research. Teachers need to understand the aspects that support the analysis and selection criteria used by the experts of the National Programme in order to use them wisely in their choices.

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