

Effects of the Brazilian inclusion policy on the linguistic education of a deaf child in the preschool

Efeitos da política brasileira de inclusão na educação linguística de uma criança surda na escola de Educação Infantil

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Abstract: This article discusses the potential effects of Brazil's inclusion policy on the linguistic education of deaf children. To this end, based on the theoretical perspective of authors from the field of Deaf Studies and Language Policies, a case study was conducted, observing interactions of a deaf child enrolled in a public kindergarten school in southeastern Brazil. Through analysis of video-recorded classroom observations and field notes, the study highlights efforts and challenges in implementing bilingual education, where the roles of the Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) and Portuguese (spoken by the majority of the participants in the classroom) are still not well-defined. In addition, the study also revealed that the observed deaf child has limited access to both languages, crucial for his/her human development. In conclusion, in order inclusion to be viable, bilingual deaf education in Brazil requires more precise guidelines and linguistic-pedagogical training for all stakeholders, including family members, to create a linguistically-rich environment that supports the holistic development of deaf children.

Keywords: Deaf child. Linguistic education. Early childhood education. Linguistic environment. Inclusion policy.

Resumo: Neste artigo, objetiva-se discutir sobre possíveis efeitos da política brasileira de inclusão na educação linguística de uma criança surda. Para tanto, com base na perspectiva teórica de autores do campo dos Estudos Surdos e das Políticas Linguísticas, desenvolveu-se um estudo de caso a partir da observação de interações de uma criança surda matriculada em uma escola pública de Educação Infantil localizada na região sudeste do Brasil. Com base na análise das observações em sala de aula registradas em vídeo e em anotações em diário de campo, foi possível evidenciar esforços e percalços para a implementação de uma educação bilíngue em que os papéis desempenhados pela língua brasileira de sinais (Libras) e pela língua portuguesa (falada pela maioria dos participantes na sala de aula) ainda não estão bem definidos. Além disso, identifica-se que a criança surda observada possui um acesso restrito às duas línguas envolvidas em sua formação humana. Conclui-se que, em busca de viabilizar a inclusão, a educação bilíngue de surdos no Brasil carece de direcionamentos mais precisos e de capacitação linguístico-pedagógica dos recursos humanos, incluindo familiares, para a promoção de um ambiente linguístico profícuo ao desenvolvimento integral de crianças surdas.

Palavras-chave: Criança surda. Educação linguística. Educação infantil. Ambiente linguístico. Política de inclusão.

1 Introduction

School education "demands", so to speak, a particular language for pedagogical reasons. The result is that only at school, while being exposed to school's artificial language, does something like a mother tongue (the language spoken at home or in a local community) and a father tongue (the official, institutionalized and/or state language), as well as their relationship (potentially conflicting), become an issue. However, we will try to indicate why and in what sense we could say that the school language is in fact the children's language (or, perhaps, better: that of the pupil or student) [...]. (MASSCHELEIN; SIMONS, 2017, p. 28)

We begin this article with a discussion that proposes thinking of the school's language as different from the mother tongue or the state language, thus establishing it as the child's language. Masschelein and Simons (2017) explain that any discussion about the school language can mean two things: (i) the language of instruction or communication, the common language through which one learns; and (ii) the language or languages one learns to speak and write at school or studies during school time. The authors emphasize that they refer to the former as the "language that is part of pedagogical practices in schools" (MASSCHELEIN; SIMONS, 2017, p. 29). Although we agree with this perspective, we understand that the matter of school language involves other layers when considering the education of deaf children, specifically those from hearing families.

The language barriers faced by deaf children in the hearing families according to Lane, Pillard and Hedberg (2011), not only hinder direct communication, but also weaken incidental socialization in the family nucleus. Although a family may have its own unconscious linguistic organization, Ribeiro, Bertonha and Castro (2020) argue that it is usually supported by external factors such as the country's legislation and the languages recognized in it. The authors point out that "there is often a lack of an effective support network for these parents who have no knowledge of the importance of the deaf capital" (RIBEIRO; BERTONHA; CASTRO, 2020, p. 218). The result of these implications is that deaf children from hearing

families tend to reach school age with language difficulties and issues.

Considering these elements and the political instruments that regulate and guide deaf education in Brazil, this paper aims at discussing the possible effects of the Brazilian inclusion policy on the linguistic education of the deaf child. Based on the theoretical perspective of authors from the field of Deaf Studies in Education, in conjunction with those from the field of Language Policies, we discuss the results of a case study carried out in a public nursery school in the metropolitan region of Grande Vitória, in Espírito Santo, a state in southeastern Brazil. The investigation was mobilized by the recording — on video and in field notes — of the observation of the interactions of a five-year-old deaf child.

The article is organized as following. After this brief introduction, we present the current situation of deaf education policy in Brazil, and establish its relationship with the national inclusion policy. Next, we describe the methodological aspects of the case study that made this present discussion possible, highlighting the characteristics of the institutional context and the participants under study. Subsequently, we present an analytical discussion on the basis of classroom observations, in order to indicate possible effects of the inclusion policy of a deaf child in Early Childhood Education. Finally, we argue that bilingual deaf education in Brazil requires precise guidelines and linguistic-pedagogical training for professionals working with deaf children and their families.

2 Deaf education policy in Brazil

A problem has run through the history of deaf education, since its emergence in the 17th century, and can be translated by the statement that the acquisition and development of language in deaf children are the main challenges of their educational process.

Considering that the experience of deafness faces challenges in the face of linguistic and social processes that are mostly hearing — they centralize vocality or the writing of vocal languages — we

assume the perspective that “the articulation between hearing impairment and linguistic difference has operated — and still operates today — so that this need is expressed in the importance of making deaf education primarily a linguistic education (WITCHES, 2021, p. 146). In this sense, we understand language education as:

[...] the set of socio-cultural factors which, throughout an individual's existence, enable them to acquire, develop and expand their knowledge of/about their mother tongue, of/about other languages, about language in general, and about all other semiotic systems. This knowledge, of course, also includes the beliefs, superstitions, representations, myths and prejudices that circulate in society around language and which make up what could be called the linguistic imaginary or, from another perspective, the linguistic ideology. Language education also includes learning the norms of linguistic behavior that govern the life of the various social groups, which are increasingly broad and varied, and in which the individual will be called upon to belong. (BAGNO; RANGEL, 2012, p. 233)

In this way, it is possible to understand that, in its own way, deaf education leads them towards shaping a certain linguistic behavior in them and offering them a certain knowledge about language. Based on the idea that deaf people may constitute a linguistic minority, bilingual deaf education stands out as an advantageous contemporary linguistic-pedagogical perspective. It foresees the positioning of a national sign language as the first language (and also as the language of instruction) in the educational process for deaf people. The second language in this process is associated with the writing system of the country's official language, a category that is usually occupied by a majority vocal language.

In Brazil, the quest for basing deaf education on a bilingual education perspective dates back to the late 1980s, when we observed the emergence of discussions about deaf bilingualism in some Brazilian universities, mainly mobilized by researchers and students in the field of Special Education. These discussions found conditions of possibility as the perspective of the epistemological field of Deaf Studies entered and expanded throughout the country. In this

same period, as highlighted by Favorito and Silva (2019), we also see the construction of pioneering bilingual deaf education projects at the National Institute for Deaf Education (em português, Ines-Instituto Nacional de Educação de Surdos) in Rio de Janeiro and at the Center for Studies and Research in Rehabilitation Prof. Dr. Gabriel de Oliveira da Silva Porto (em português, Cepre - Centro de Estudos e Pesquisas em Reabilitação Prof. Dr. Gabriel de Oliveira da Silva Porto) in Campinas. According to the authors, “studies and research aligned with the need to (re)create bilingual education projects for the deaf are increasingly on the agenda of groups and lines of research in education, Linguistics and Applied Linguistics” (FAVORITO; SILVA, 2019, p. 205).

Efforts to promote deaf bilingualism in Brazil culminated in some fundamental achievements at the beginning of the 21st century. Among these, we highlight, first, the legal recognition of the Brazilian Sign Language (Libras). In the direction of an international movement to promote sign languages (DE MEULDER, 2015), Brazil formalized the recognition of Libras with the Federal Law No. 10.436 of April 24, 2002. Although this recognition is often interpreted as the formalization of a second official language of the country, the Libras Law, as it is popularly identified, recognizes Libras and other resources of expression associated with it as a *legal means of communication and expression*. Given the widespread circulation of the erroneous idea that Libras is a second official language in Brazil, Abreu (2018, p. 67) argues:

The immense taxonomic confusion generated by the Libras Law is add up to a larger scenario of disorganization of the linguistic issues in the country's legal system, revealing that, in fact, the country does not even have a minimum guideline for treating legislatively the classification of the legal statutes of the languages in Brazil.

In addition, another aspect that stands out in this recognition, in the sole paragraph of the aforementioned Law, is the requirement that Libras does not replace the written modality of the Portuguese language. Although this can be understood as a strategy for deaf people in Brazil to continue learning

Portuguese as a second language, this imposition reinforces a condition of inequality that falls on Libras. Despite being a minority language, Libras remains the only legally recognized sign language in Brazil, which ends up making invisible the other sign languages used in the country by indigenous or isolated communities (GOMES; VILHALVA, 2021).

The Libras Law also establishes that public authorities and service concessionaires not only guarantee institutionalized forms of supporting the Libras use and dissemination, but also guarantee adequate care and treatment for *the carriers of hearing impairment*, as the term is used in the document. The law also establishes that the federal, state, municipal and Federal District education systems guarantee that Libras is taught in training courses in Special Education, Speech Therapy and Teaching, at secondary or higher education levels.

In the same direction, a second achievement resulting from efforts to build deaf bilingualism in Brazil is the Federal Decree No. 5.626, of December 22, 2005. By regulating the Libras Law and Art. 18 of the Law No. 10.098/2000 — which provided for the implementation of sign language interpreters' training (the term *linguagem de sinais* is used in the document) and interpreter-guides —, the 2005 Decree details, among other things, (i) the inclusion of Libras as a compulsory unit in the curriculum of degree courses for teachers' training, in speech therapy courses, and as an optional unit in other Higher Education courses and in professional education; (ii) the training of Libras teachers; (iii) the use and dissemination of Libras and Portuguese for deaf people to access to education (which includes the provision of translation and interpretation of Libras and Portuguese, and the teaching of Portuguese as a second language for deaf students); and (iv) the training of translators and interpreters to work with the linguistic pair formed by Libras and the Portuguese language.

This instrument served as the legal basis for the creation of the first undergraduate course in Language-Libras, a distance learning degree offered throughout Brazil by the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) from 2006. As the course aimed to

train Libras teachers, preferably deaf as established by the 2005 Decree, hearing professionals who demanded Higher Education in Translation and Interpretation mobilized the offer of a bachelor's degree in Language-Libras whose first class at UFSC began in 2008 (QUADROS; STUMPF, 2014).

In the same year, the Ministry of Education presented the *National Policy for Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education* (BRASIL, 2008). Driven by international inclusion guidelines, the policy strengthened the explicit recommendation that Special Education students attend mainstream schools. As part of the Policy's target audience, students with deafness had until then been educated exclusively in Special Education institutions, some of which were specialized in deaf education, such as the aforementioned Ines, the first school for the deaf in Brazil, which was founded in the second half of the 19th century. When comparing the 2005 Decree and the 2008 Policy, Lodi (2013) points to a relevant issue. The author notes that:

[...] the Decree understands bilingual education for the deaf as a social issue that involves the Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) and the Portuguese language in an intrinsic relationship with the cultural aspects that determine and are determined by each language; the Policy, in turn, reduces bilingual education to the presence of two languages within the school without allowing each one to assume its place of pertinence for the groups that use them, maintaining the hegemony of Portuguese in the educational processes. (LODI, 2013, p. 49)

Four decades after the first undertakings towards deaf bilingualism, challenges remain for the establishment of an effective language policy for the education of the deaf in Brazil. According to Mertzani (2019), the implementation of deaf bilingualism, the legislation around sign languages, and the development of a curriculum aimed at bilingual education have not yet materialized in most countries around the world. Therefore, not every deaf child has the opportunity to develop bilingually and, in most cases, to grow up in homes whose linguistic environment is favorable to the acquisition of sign language. Many of these children come from hearing

families who "stipulate their own organization of how they will 'raise' their children linguistically" (RIBEIRO; BERTONHA; CASTRO, 2020, p. 217).

In this sense, the institutional environment of Early Childhood Education often becomes the first context to enable a deaf child to begin a process of linguistic development in sign language, integrating him/her into a symbolic and cultural universe based on stories, games, and other social experiences. We will deal more specifically with this context in the following section, when we explain the methodological aspects of the study whose data allowed the discussion we develop in this paper.

3 The study with the deaf child in the kindergarten

Understanding the complexity and ethical implications of research with children and, in particular, with deaf children (KARNOPP, 2017), this article consists of developments made possible by research into the interactions of a deaf child in Early Childhood Education, approved by the Research Ethics Committee in December 2022.¹

The research comprised a case study (YIN, 2015) in a municipal public kindergarten located on the coast of Grande Vitória, in Espírito Santo, a state in southeastern Brazil. The case study, according to Yin (2015), comprises an in-depth study of one or more objects with the intention of getting to know a given situation in detail, seeking to describe it and explain its variables. Considering that the interaction of the deaf child in Early Childhood Education was the main object of analysis of the investigation from which this article unfolds, the case study was the methodological strategy adopted.

The school where the study took place was founded in 2013 and serves approximately 300 children between the ages of three and five, in the morning and afternoon shifts. Two criteria were used to choose this institution: it had to be a kindergarten school and have at least one deaf child enrolled. It

is important to note that, from 2006 onwards, the Department of Education of the municipality where the school is located worked to support a project that "aimed to include deaf students by structuring an educational policy that ensured the use of Libras, [...] providing them with access to and permanence in the education system by promoting bilingual classes" (VIEIRA-MACHADO, 2010, p. 27).

Currently, according to the 2022 resolution that establishes the guidelines for Special Education in the municipal education system, Specialized Educational Assistance (AEE) is offered in three ways: (i) in the regular classroom, by a Special Education teacher in collaboration with the teacher in charge, comprising the pedagogical intervention in the development of alternative curricular processes; (ii) in a multifunctional resource room, during the school day, by a Special Education teacher, which is complementary or supplementary to the regular curriculum; (iii) in a bilingual classroom by a Libras teacher, bilingual teacher and/or *interpreter-translator teacher* (the nomenclature used in the document), in which Libras is used as the language of instruction and first language, and written Portuguese as the second language.

The deaf child who is the protagonist of the research has been assisted in the model of the first line of the AEE action in the study's participant institution since 2022. He was a five-year-old boy, son of hearing Portuguese-speaking parents. We chose not to define etiological aspects of his deafness, because, beyond causes and levels of sensory impairment, we understand deafness as an experience. Thus, we understand it "as a way of constituting deaf subjects, deaf subjectivities, very specific ways of being and relating in a world regulated by hearing norms" (WITCHES; LOPES, 2015, p. 36). Once the child's sensory hearing impairment was diagnosed, he was described, questioned and conducted as a deaf subject. Although his individual trajectory is marked by its own contours — inherent to his way of being, the context and environment in which he lives, and the people he interacts with — we assume that the deaf child's subjectivity is also produced from a matrix of

¹ Consubstantiated report of the Research Ethics Committee on the Brazil Platform under no. 5.791.509.

experience that is sufficiently thick historically for it shares universal characteristics among deaf people all over the world.

For data generation, the strategy of participant observation was adopted, understood here as a technique that allows us to enter the social world of the study participants (MOREIRA; CALEFFE, 2008). This technique permitted to record in detail the events witnessed in the deaf child's classroom. The observation records were made on video and in field notes. The moments of participant observation took place over a period of two months, twice a week, focusing on interactive episodes among the deaf child and other children, and between the deaf child and the teachers during classroom activities.

Before starting to generate data, authorization had to be obtained from the school's director and the Municipal Department of Education. In addition, the teachers who work in the deaf child's room and the childrens' legal guardians who study in that room were consulted and authorized to participate in the research. All the participants (including the children's guardians) signed two documents: the *Informed Consent Form* and the *Image and Sound Use Form*. The participating children were also consulted and gave their consent by filling in the *Informed Consent Form*, which was written in accessible language and also translated into Libras. The adaptation of this type of document, according to Albres and Sousa (2019), allows children to have the opportunity and right to be informed appropriately to their language level.

Data was prepared and analyzed using an inductive approach, which, according to Moreira and Caleffe (2008, p. 220) "data is explored in terms of units of meaning". Thus, by interpreting and articulating this data when reading the transcripts of the recordings and the field notes in the form of units of meaning, themes, patterns, and other categories relevant to the study are identified. It is important to note that the objective of this paper is a feasible development due to an inductive movement in which the study's produced data are generalized to a macro situation. This movement, however, is not aimed at considering this generalization as true, but rather at offering tensions

about the possible effects of a given political conjuncture. In the following section, we present elements that emerged from this analysis and that allow us to discuss the effects of the inclusion policy in the language education of the deaf child participating in the study.

4 Effects of the inclusion policy in the Kindergarten classroom

Considering a rehabilitative perspective, the deaf child's childhood is assumed to be the best phase for dealing with the body and deafness and, thus, early education is seen as the best possibility for installing technologies in the body. From this perspective, according to Vieira-Machado and Teixeira (2019, p. 62), the "chronological childhood of the deaf child has been the target of medicine since birth". The authors argue that when the family is informed of the child's diagnosis of deafness, speech therapy professionals immediately come on the scene to offer guidance and ways of overcoming deafness, presenting strategies or devices that aim to bring the deaf child closer to a hearing ideal. In an increasingly technological and globalized world, according to Pontin (2021, p. 15), "parents and/or guardians are persuaded to place cochlear implants in deaf children, and teachers are captured for training, learning how to handle the FM System". Having said that, we would like to address that the deaf child of this study does not use a cochlear implant or any other type of hearing aid. The child's mother, however, received guidance and is determined to refer her son for cochlear implant surgery.

Based on the first observations of the deaf child's interactions in the classroom, as well as on information obtained from dialogues with teachers and the school's management team, we realized that the deaf child has restricted access to Libras and the Portuguese language. It is important to note that the study, whose data are deployed to consider the effects of the national inclusion policy on the linguistic education of deaf children, did not involve any systematic assessment of the deaf child's linguistic

levels or proficiency. Thus, this perception matters for this discussion as we identify, as highlighted by Ribeiro, Bertonha and Castro (2020) that the linguistic policy in the family domain of this child is centered on the use of Portuguese as a first language, in a way that there were no movements towards developing an accessible linguistic environment in sign language until his entry into school.

Once attended by the municipal education system, considering the municipality's inclusive and bilingual education policy, we understood that the best inclusion strategy would be to allow the child to attend a bilingual class in a municipal education unit that is considered a reference in deaf bilingual education. For particular reasons and of location, the family had to enroll the child in the kindergarten, and so, at the time of the observations, he was the only deaf child in the school.

Because the child is considered to be a special education student, he began to receive AEE in a regular kindergarten classroom, accompanied by a bilingual teacher who worked alongside the regular teacher. The first contact with Libras with the bilingual teacher had to be interrupted and the school waited for a short time for another professional to be appointed. The absence of more intense contact with sign language at home and at school has conditioned the deaf child to try to understand what is said to him in two main ways: mouth reading and gestures. Considering this, we identified that in the first moments of observation, still without the presence of a new bilingual teacher, the deaf child remained seated for a longer time — unlike most hearing children in the same room — focusing his attention on the teacher.

Although she is not fluent in Libras, this teacher always positioned herself so that the child could see her facial expressions and the movement of her lips when she addressed the group of children as a whole. At all times when she interacted directly with the deaf child, the teacher mixed vocalization and gestures to try to make herself understood, getting closer to her interlocutor. At different times, the hearing children also interacted with the deaf child, mainly through gestures. Despite the linguistic limitations of the context, the deaf

child, in turn, demonstrated familiarity with the school routine, assimilating with some ease the objective of some tasks, such as coloring a drawing given by the teacher.

In one particular observation session, the deaf child was once again attended by a bilingual teacher, who allowed Libras to return to the classroom. From this session onwards, the professional usually sat on a chair in front of the deaf child's desk and, at certain times, interpreted simultaneously into Libras of what was said in Portuguese by the teacher, while at other times she tried to establish communication in Libras with the deaf child, in an attempt to explain in other ways what is being said. It is not possible to specify how much of the interactions in Libras have been understood by the deaf child. Since the arrival of the bilingual teacher, we noticed that the deaf child started to show less interest in remaining seated, demanding the professional's attention in many moments. In view of these elements, we point out some issues that can be considered effects of the national policy of inclusion in the linguistic education of the deaf child centered on this study. The first of these — and the one we consider to be most significant — is the lack of structures that provide the conditions for this child's family to be linguistically educated. Not only in the sense of learning sign language, but also of being equally informed or guided about the advantages of the deaf child growing up in a linguistic environment favorable to the development of their *bilinguality* — here understood in the definition presented by Salgado and Dias (2010, p. 149) as “the individual expression of a situation of bilingualism”. With the creation of this environment, according to the authors,

[...] we can encourage students to exercise their bilingualism by giving them opportunities to express themselves in the linguistic repertoires they have. Language contact itself will be a motivating agent for the exercise of bilingualism and, consequently, a driving force for new language learning. (SALGADO; DIAS, 2010, p. 150)

Although we have many achievements in promoting deaf bilingual education, the normative

instruments and curricular guidelines that guide deaf education in Brazil do not provide mechanisms for the acquisition of sign language to take place in the family context. There seems to be a widespread fear about the determination to learn this language from an early age. Even though it is accepted, made visible and celebrated, Libras remains in a limiting condition, almost as if it could be the factor that makes deaf children's inclusion impossible. Thus, the policy leaves the decision to learn Libras open, subject to a hypothetical parental choice, which, at best, is initiated only in the school context.

Another effect of the national inclusion policy is the strategies of the education systems that consider the presence of deaf children in an institution whose linguistic environment is not conducive to their development. Although we understand that the impediment for the deaf child to attend a bilingual class in the municipality is due to a family difficulty in locating a reference school for deaf education, the designation of a bilingual teacher in a school where most people interact in Portuguese seems to reduce bilingualism to the simple presence of two languages at school, as argued by Lodi (2013).

A third effect can be associated with pedagogical practice. The bilingual teacher working in the regular classroom, together with the head teacher, will hardly have the conditions to promote a bilingual education or the bilinguality of the deaf child. Regarding the simultaneous interpreting of the teacher's activities, how is the place occupied by the languages involved in this process defined? If the teacher develops content for the learning of Portuguese as the first language of hearing students, it is worth asking how this process is conceived within the shared classroom, so that it can be learned as a second language by the deaf child.

Based on the discussion raised by this case study, we can say that the efforts, but also setbacks, for the development of deaf bilingual education can be associated with the restricted access to and use of Libras and Portuguese, as well as with a lack of defining the language roles in the institution's context. With this, in no way do we intend to make the school or

the municipal system responsible, but rather we want to demonstrate that for the development of bilingual education in the country the available conditions need improvement. Next, we present our considerations on this.

5 Final considerations

We started this paper with a discussion that proposes the school's language as the child's language. We refer to Masschelein and Simons (2014) to complete this discussion, based on their understanding of childhood as *power* and *ex-position*. From this perspective, the power of childhood lies (i) in the movement or displacement outside oneself; (ii) in the word or translation; and (iii) in thought or reminiscence. For the authors, the threefold power of childhood unfolds in an *ex-position* that can be understood from the point of view of as being and handed over to *others*, from the point of childhood dependence or of vulnerability. In the wake of this perception, we have the challenge of interpreting the practices that constitute the pedagogical space that seeks the deaf child's bilingualism and bilinguality development.

In this article, we discuss possible effects of the Brazilian inclusion policy on a deaf child's language education. Based on a case study that involved observing a child's interactions in a public kindergarten school, we identified efforts and challenges for the development of his language education. The effects of the policy can be understood, above all, in the limiting implications for language learning by the deaf child and his family, as well as in the absence of structures that would enable the full use of the languages involved in deaf bilingual education.

In line with these, we can conclude that, in order to make inclusion possible, deaf bilingual education requires guidance and directives that offer more concrete guidelines for its effective implementation. Institutions will need to devise mechanisms that enable the linguistic-pedagogical training of professionals to work in deaf education, and that include deaf children's families in the process of

promoting an environment for each deaf child's linguistic potential. Perhaps, then, we will no longer say that the school's language is the child's language, but that the school's language is the child's *languages*.

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