



## Paulo Freire: a look at the literacy history of the Educator of freedom<sup>1</sup>

Paulo Freire: um olhar para a história de alfabetização do Educador da liberdade

Paulo Freire: una mirada a la historia de la alfabetización del Educador de la libertad

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### Abstract

The early history of learning to read and write of literature and education professionals represented the main mobilization of this work. The purpose was to understand how Paulo Freire's literacy process happened. Although there are records about this trajectory, we believe that a more specific elaboration on the subject is necessary, especially due to the importance that the act of literacy had in the educator's life throughout his existence. The methodology adopted was bibliographical research and narrative research. Early on, Paulo Freire's literacy was a set of learning processes involving the binomial social condition and formal knowledge, inseparable pedagogical aspects also in his work, which led him to reject the mechanistic propositions of the spelling books. Thus, many of the elements present in his process of understanding the reading and writing systems had a profound impact on his critical, educational and humanist work.

**Keywords:** Paulo Freire. Literacy. Critical education.

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## Resumo

A história inicial de aprendizagem da leitura e da escrita de profissionais da literatura e educação representou a principal mobilização deste trabalho. O objetivo foi compreender como ocorreu o processo de alfabetização de Paulo Freire. Embora existam registros sobre essa trajetória, avaliamos ser necessária uma elaboração mais específica sobre o tema, sobretudo pela importância que o ato de alfabetizar teve na vida do educador ao longo de sua vida. A metodologia adotada foi a pesquisa bibliográfica e a pesquisa narrativa. A alfabetização de Paulo Freire desde cedo vislumbrava um conjunto de aprendizagens envolvendo o binômio, condição social e saber formal, aspectos pedagógicos inseparáveis também em seus trabalhos, o que o levava a rejeitar as proposições mecanicistas das cartilhas. Assim, muitos dos elementos presentes em seu processo de compreensão do sistema da leitura e da escrita repercutiram profundamente no decorrer de sua atuação crítica, educadora e humanista.

**Palavras-chave:** Paulo Freire. Alfabetização. Educação crítica.

## Resumen

La historia inicial de aprender a leer y escribir desde la literatura y los profesionales de la educación representó la principal movilización de este trabajo. El objetivo era comprender cómo se desarrolló el proceso de alfabetización de Paulo Freire. Si bien existen registros sobre esta trayectoria, creemos que es necesaria una elaboración más específica sobre el tema, especialmente por la importancia que ha tenido el acto de alfabetización en la vida del educador a lo largo de su vida. La metodología adoptada fue la investigación bibliográfica y la investigación narrativa. La alfabetización de Paulo Freire desde temprana edad vislumbraba un conjunto de aprendizajes que involucraban el binomio, la condición social y el conocimiento formal, aspectos pedagógicos inseparables también en sus obras, lo que lo llevó a rechazar las proposiciones mecanicistas de los folletos. Así, muchos de los elementos presentes en su proceso de comprensión del sistema de lectura y escritura tuvieron un profundo impacto en su labor crítica, educativa y humanística.

**Palabras-clave:** Paulo Freire. Literatura. Educación crítica.

## Contextualization

As a literacy teacher and researcher, I have been venturing for some time going through the learning trajectories of reading and writing of people from literature and education in order to understand how this process occurred, valuing the learner's perspective. In this way, the inquietudes that have provoked this mobilization are related to their movements, especially in what concerns their insertion into the world of written culture. I believe that the knowledge of these processes can strengthen the area of knowledge of the history of Literacy. An area that has been mainly constituted from the analysis of the didactic materials used<sup>2</sup>, especially the spelling books, and related to it, the synthetic and analytical methods.

Although, there is little or insufficient attention to autobiographical narratives, resources that can provide important elements about the entry into the written world and, in this way, enable new sources and revitalization for the History of Education. In addition, they can inform the connection of these learnings to the social and educational contexts of the time and the extent to which these experiences relate to what they became.

Thus, our academic attention aimed at understanding how Paulo Freire's access to the written culture occurred. We infer that some of the premises that underlie his arguments on the process of developing reading and writing are deeply related to the origins of his literacy.

This study was elaborated in the second semester of 2020 and was a product of the Research Line Literacy & Written Culture, associated to the Research Group on Education in the Amazon (GPEA). A research collective located in the Department of Intercultural Education (DEINTER) of the Federal University of Rondônia, Ji-Paraná, Urupá Campus.

Bibliographic research was the methodological procedures required for the elaboration of this work, especially the readings of Paulo Freire (1989; 1992), texts about the author (1996; 2004; 2005) and theoretical reflections about Literacy. Narrative research was another important methodological resource, as a means of valuing personal experiences: "People live stories and when telling these stories they reaffirm themselves. They change themselves and create new stories. Stories lived and told educate ourselves and others, [...]". (CLANDININ; CONNELLY, 2011, p. 27).

### 1 - Cultural practices of language – orality, reading and writing.

There are children who come to school knowing that writing is for writing clever, funny or important things. These are the ones who finish literacy in school, but started literacy much earlier, through the possibility of getting in touch, of interacting with the written language. There are other children who need school to acquire writing skills. (FERREIRO, 1999, p. 23).

Studies on the Psychogenesis of written language have raised important considerations about the relations between the cultural practices of written/oral language and the literacy process. According to Emília Ferreiro, "The development of literacy undoubtedly occurs in a social environment. [...]". (FERREIRO, 1991, p. 24). Thinking about literacy and its intertwining, orality, writing and reading demands knowledge about how these elements were present in the daily life of the boy from Pernambuco, later known as the educator Paulo Freire:

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mortatti (2000; 2006; 2011; 2014); Frade; Maciel (2005), Vieira (2017).

“[...] my personal non-selves were my parents, my sister, my brothers, [...]. It was with these different non-selves that I constituted myself [...]. I was a things maker, I was a thinker, I was a talker”. (FREIRE, 1995, p. 25).

In the “Baby Book,” a material with important records of Paulo Freire’s childhood, his mother reported that he was not very talkative: “The first word he said was *Papá* [...]. He speaks very little [...]. When his father insists on him to talk, he just answers: ‘I don’t know how to talk’. It’s pride, he will only speak when he really knows”. (FREIRE, 2017, p. 48). This episode allows us to ponder that it is common at the beginning of oral language acquisition for children to pronounce words differently from those used conventionally.

Paulo Freire used to do this when calling his father “*papá*” or when he referred to his mother as “*mamãe minha*”, confirming that: “In oral language we allow the child to make mistakes in producing as much as in interpreting, and to learn through his attempts to speak and to understand the speech of others. [...]” (FERREIRO, 1993, p. 31). Although orality and writing have different characteristics, situations like this can contribute to rethinking our ways of literacy, especially regarding the way of dealing with errors.

The educator recognized the relevance of oral language in the communicative processes in society and at school. On this subject, when reporting aspects of his childhood, he presented elements that are close to orality. He mentioned the children’s attention to the adults’ conversations: “Part of the context – of my immediate world – was also the language universe of the elders, expressing their beliefs, their tastes, their fears, their values. [...]” (FREIRE, 1989, p.13).

About writing, we have understood that in an environment where family members use written culture and that the child takes an active part from the elements of reading and writing, it is possible that, as in other situations, he/she starts to understand this object.

Regarding writing, it is common from an early age for children to have access to the spelling of their name, which is usually embroidered on their towels, sheets, on the bedroom door, for example, configuring that: “These are the situations of use of reading and writing and the value that is given to these social practices that configure a literacy environment, [...] a space for reflection on how things work in the world of writing: the materials in which one reads, the situations in which one writes. [...]” (SOLIGO, 2002, p. 276).

Also in this direction, Paulo Freire experienced a set of significant actions related to the act of reading, attesting that: “[...] different groups of readers invest in the practice of reading. [...]” (CHARTIER, 1991, p. 179). We are referring to the routine act of listening to readings performed by adults before going to bed or even in other situations in which, by their initiative, they requested these activities. Thus, at home and on the street, in the various urbanized spaces, children are challenged by writing and thus have the opportunity to think about:

How do children understand these functions? Children who grow up in families in which there are literate people and where reading and writing are everyday activities, receive this information through participation in social acts where the written language fulfills precise functions. [...], the mother writes the shopping list for the market, [...] and consults it before finishing her shopping: unintentionally, she is transmitting information about one of the functions of the written language [...]. (FERREIRO, 1993, p. 19).

Considering this discussion on the importance of the cultural practices of language that involve reading and writing, we wonder: how was the context in which Paulo Freire lived? Nita Freire, the author’s widow, says that: “His father not only made him sleep singing, but also read children’s storybooks and later talked to Paulo about his ethical and political convictions.” (FREIRE, 2017, p. 50). We infer that the educator possibly followed some records made in the

Baby Book, considering the different dates presented: “[...]. The first word he said was *Papá* on March 2nd, 1922. [...]. To my little son Paulo, at the age of 4. [...]. He started learning to read on July 15th, 1925, at the age of 4. [...]”. (FREIRE, 2017, p. 48-49).

It means to say that the middle-class context in which Paulo Freire lived his childhood, despite the financial difficulties, constituted an environment that valued the written culture. The experience of the cultural practices of orality, writing and reading possibly favored his literacy process, an evaluation shared by the author later: “Today, [...] looking back, looking so far ahead, I realize how the issues related to language, its understanding, were always present in me”. (FREIRE, 2020, p. 90).

## 2 - Paulo Freire and the house as a place of initiation to formal knowledge

The most complete narrative of Paulo Freire’s literacy was presented in one of the editions of the Brazilian Reading Congress (COLE), Campinas, in November 1981. On that occasion, he was invited to open the event with the theme: “The importance of the act of reading”. It was on this opportunity that the educator started the conference reflection, based on personal experiences of how he learned to read and write: “[...]. Perhaps this is the most accurate meaning of literacy: learning to write your life, as an author and as a witness of your history, that is, to biographize yourself, to exist, to historicize yourself. [...]”. (FIORI, 1987, p. 6).

There he pondered on his learning of reading and writing, which took place in the backyard of the family home, under the trees, with the collaboration of his father and mother: “I was taught to read and write on the ground of the backyard of my house, in the shade of the mango trees, with words from my world, not from the wider world of my parents. The ground was my blackboard; the sticks, my chalk”. (FREIRE, 1989, p. 15). The story allowed us to infer that the initiation of formal knowledge at home, by family members, was possibly a common behavior at the time for certain family groups: “[...]. I was born about eight years before the big crash – I was born in 1921 – and my family, middle-class, suffered a lot as a result. [...]”. (FREIRE; HORTON, 2003, p. 53).

However, the studies concerning the History of Brazilian Education in the first half of the 20th century present little information about children’s literacy in a family context. “When I started the research [...], I came across an immense gap, domestic education, which the historiography of education in Brazil seemed not to dare to fill, privileging the study of formal institutions of education [...] in charge of the State, [...]”. (VASCONCELOS, 2004, p. 10).

Recent studies supported by the resources of autobiographical research have made possible a set of excavations in public or anonymous people’s memorials in order to capture data that allow analyzing other elements of the History of Literacy. Among these works, we mention Carvalho’s (2011) writings, which focus on important historiographical aspects of the written language acquisition practices of fourteen (14) literates between the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

In this perspective, the author emphasizes the home as a locus of initial learning of the cultural practice of reading: “In the literacy memories focused here, we recall the times when reading was learned at home, systematically or not, with the help of mothers and grandmothers, nannies, or housekeepers of upper-middle-class families. [...]”. (CARVALHO, 2011, p. 2). This explains the importance of narrative and autobiographical research as a relevant mechanism of knowledge production. A possibility to revisit themes from new perspectives, since: “[...]. At each new version of the story, the experience is re-signified [...] and leads us to search for the relations between living and telling, action and reflection, narrative, language, autobiographical reflexivity and historical consciousness”. (PASSEGGI, 2011, p. 148).

Paulo Freire discussed the subject of reading, taking his experiential knowledges as starting point, which allowed the understanding of aspects of his literacy history. A decolonial gesture that expresses the valorization of the knowledge of the subjects in their relation with the world. The memories of this reflexive process constituted the necessary devices to explain the connection he established with this cultural practice, even when he was not yet reading conventionally:

To recapture a distant childhood, to understand my act of ‘reading’ the particular world in which I moved – and as far as I am not betrayed by memory, is absolutely meaningful to me. In this effort to which I am giving myself, I recreated and relived in the text I wrote the experience I lived **when I did not yet read the words**. (FREIRE, 1989, p. 9, emphasis added).

As a “connective boy”, he reports the surrounding universe from a child’s view, but possibly from words borrowed from the educator. A gap in the text that reveals the treacherous border between the narrator and the narrated. How to explain in a child’s language the difficult and complex economic situation of hunger that Paulo Freire would denounce in many of his writings?

Born, so, in a middle class family that had suffered the impacts of the 1929 economic crisis, we were ‘connective boys’. Participating in the world of those who ate, even if we ate little, we also participated in the world of those who didn’t eat, even if we ate more than they did – the world of the boys and girls from the streams, from the mocambos, from the hills. (FREIRE, 2015, p. 51).

In this regard, the author recognizes that “[...] it is impossible to escape fiction in any experience of memorializing. [...]” (FREIRE, 2020, p. 34). In this sense, it is possible to infer that Paulo Freire’s understanding of reading from the way he was literate enabled the understanding that preceded the reading of paper. We risk saying that the scenario of his home and family environment constituted his first Culture Circle:

The old house, its bedrooms, its corridor, its attic, its terrace – the setting for my mother’s fern –, the large yard where the terrace was located, all this was my first world. In this world I crawled, gurgled, first stood up, took my first steps, said my first words. Truly, that special world presented itself to me as the arena of my perceptual activity, and therefore as the world of my first reading. [...] I learned to understand thing, objects, signs through using them in relationship to my older brothers and sisters and my parents. (FREIRE, 1989, p. 9).

The way he establishes dynamic and convergent relations between formal and informal knowledge possibly contributed to the defense and development of arguments in favor of a sensorial education, in which the: “[...] the act of reading occurred in my existential experience. First, ‘reading’ the [...], the tiny world in which I moved; afterward, reading the word. [...]” (FREIRE, 1989, p. 9). Social knowledge and formal knowledge constitute founding elements of Freirean philosophy, which can be interpreted in some situations as an immediate didactic or methodological tool in the search for meaningful learning:

critical understanding of reading, which is not exhausted merely by decoding the written word [...], but rather anticipated by and extending into knowledge of the world. **Reading the world precedes reading the word**, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world. Language and reality are dynamically intertwined. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context. (FREIRE, 1989, p. 9, emphasis added).

It was not possible to find details of Paulo Freire's literacy routine. The evidence he presents in his narrative, "[...] The 'texts', the 'words', the 'letters' of that context – in perceiving these I experienced myself, and the more I experienced myself, the more my perceptual capacity increased [...]". (FREIRE, 1989, p. 9). He leads us to infer that there his parents systematized the key terms of his initiation into the written culture. Possibly, tanager, flycatcher, thrush, cat, Joli... A process that can be translated as a stage of answers that responded to the learner's curiosity:

And it precisely my parents who introduced me to reading the word at a certain moment in this rich experience of understanding my immediate world. Deciphering the word flowed naturally from 'reading' my particular world. It was not something superimposed on it. [...]. (FREIRE, 1989, p. 11).

Perhaps Paulo Freire's experience in the course of his literacy journey was so enriching that it stimulated and mobilized him to materialize a critical proposition of initiation to writing as an undeniable right of adults: "I considered that literacy was the most important issue, [...] the level of illiteracy in Brazil was still extremely high. [...], it seemed to me a profound injustice to have men and women who could not read or write. [...]". (FREIRE; MACEDO, 1990, p. 110). These concerns against the four-hundred-year-old beast, the illiteracy so well translated by Tiago de Mello, constituted a political and pedagogical struggle that accompanied him throughout his life.

Thus Paulo Freire was born in the political context of the First Brazilian Republic, at a time when education was being organized. It had repercussions on society through the demand for schooling, which was considered by the middle class as a resource for social prestige. In this sense, like the children and youngsters of that time, the boy from Pernambuco learned the meaning of reading and writing through experiences in the family environment. The classes with his father and mother under the trees made possible important contributions to the learning of these cultural practices.

### 3 - Learning in private elementary schools

another point that has not yet received due attention [...] the private schooling networks, developed by the initiative of individuals, families, groups and/or diverse social sectors, whose strategies point to the coexistence of plural educational practices at the local level, especially in the cities, but also in rural areas. (SCHUELER; MAGALDI, 2009, p. 54).

The literacy memories made possible by narrative or autobiographical research have enabled approximations to the processes of writing acquisition from different subjects, temporalities and spaces. As an example, we mention “Lins do Rego’s experiences”, analyzed by Carvalho (2011), in which she reports a private teacher named Sinhá Gorda. We highlight the record of the private lessons mentioned through memories that have not been included in the analyses of the historiography of Brazilian education. The presence of the private teacher as responsible for the initiation to formal knowledge through literacy can be understood in two elements: education was socially seen as a family responsibility due to the inexistence of a public educational system and by the fact that it was considered a means of valorization and social ascension (CURY, 2002).

In this context that we situate Paulo Freire’s first initiatives in the writing, a moment when he had private lessons with teacher Amália, an early childhood educator who was almost a preschool professional: “He began to learn to read on July 15th, 1925 at the age of 4. His first teacher was Mrs. Amália Costa Lima, [...]” (FREIRE, 2017, p. 51). A record that raises new questions to think about, since education was for few people. This was another element that made Paulo Freire’s meeting with education unique.

In different times, punishment was considered almost a “pedagogical resource” and in the First Republic (1889-1930), this was not different. Once again, memories have become relevant historical sources for education. In this sense, Graciliano Ramos’ (1994) memories about childhood and literacy highlight the relations between physical punishment and formal education. And in relation to Paulo Freire, punishment was inevitable sometimes: “[...]. He received his first little slap on the night of March 11th, 1923, from his mother, who did it to him because she could not stand so much bad behavior anymore. [...]”. (FREIRE, 2017, p. 47). But perhaps because of his age, this memory was not the most important one, the one that remained in the educator’s memory.

On this subject, Paulo Freire records reflections regarding paternal educational guidelines: “[...]. My father’s hands had not been made to hurt his children, but to teach them to do things”. (FREIRE, 1979, p. 15). Perhaps this is why the author was so restless when, as an adult, faced the problem of physical punishment during the period when he worked at SESI (1947-1957). The description of the punishments received because of the behavior interpreted as disobedience goes back to the colonial period in the book *The Masters and the Slaves*, by Gilberto Freyre (1995), in which punishment was used as a form of control and educational factor:

Punishments in other areas of the state that I researched ranged from tying children to a tree, locking them in a room for hours, giving them ‘cakes’ with thick, heavy switches, forcing them kneel on stones used to grind corn, thrashing them with leather straps. The latter was the predominant punishment in a town in the Zona da Mata, famous for its shoe manufacturing. These punishments were applied for trivial reasons, and people watching the fishing were told it: ‘hard punishment makes tough people, who are up to the cruelty of life’. ‘Getting hit makes a real man’. (FREIRE, 1992, p. 11).

On this occasion he presents a moving report on the subject, in my opinion, one of the reflections that shows the pedagogical humility of the educator. After a lecture that he thought was important about the damages of physical punishment to the children’s formation. On this opportunity, one of the parents talked about his hard routine as an exploited worker, establishing differences between the ways of educating in a class context, questioning Paulo Freire’s way of life:



When I had conclude, a man of about forty, still rather young but already worn out and exhausted, raised his hand and gave me the clearest and most bruising lesson I have ever received in my life as an educator. I do not know his name. I do not know whether he is still alive. Possibly not. The wickedness of the country's socioeconomic structures, which take on stronger colors in the Brazilian Northeast, suffering, hunger, the indifference of the mighty, all this must have swallowed him up long since. He raised his hand and gave a talk that I have never been able to forget. It spares my soul for good and all. It has exerted an enormous influence on me. Nearly always, in academic ceremonies in which I have had an honorary doctorate conferred on me by some university, I acknowledge how much I owe, as well, to persons like the one of whom I am now speaking, and not only to scientists, thinkers who have taught me, too, and who continue to teach me, teachers without whom it would have been impossible for me to learn, like the laborer who spoke that night. [...]. (FREIRE, 1992, p. 13).

This certainly constituted one of the important markers in Paulo Freire's formative trajectory, systematized by him as knowledge forged in the "knowledge from living experience" (FREIRE, 1992, p. 14). A set of knowledge that is elaborated through experiences and does not pass through the school. This discussion was taken up again in *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1996) to support the importance of families in the formation process of their children. There the educator states that this participation did not mean connivance with his practice, but a form of explicit denial of silence.

Going back to the records of Paulo Freire's teachers, besides Amália Costa Lima (FREIRE, 2017), a private teacher, when he was 4 (four) years old, Paulo Freire (2020) reports other important contributions to his life, such as Áurea Bahia, when he still lived in Recife. But the best known teacher in his works (FREIRE, 1989; 2020) and in the texts of his biographers, considered as his first teacher, was Eunice Vasconcelos. He met her in 1927: "[...] when I was six years old I arrived at Eunice's school, my first professional teacher, and I was already literate. [...]" (FREIRE, 2020, p. 58). It is with this teacher, owner of a private school, that the educator will deepen the knowledge of writing from the systematization of sentences:

I have never forgotten the joy with which I welcomed the exercises called 'sentence forming' that our teacher gave us. She would ask me to write in a straight line all the words that I knew. Afterward, I was supposed to form sentences with these words and later we discussed the meaning of each sentence I had created. This is how, little by little, I began to know my verbs, tenses and moods; she taught me by increasing the level of difficulty. My teacher's fundamental preoccupation was not with making me memorize grammatical definitions, but stimulating the development of my oral and writing abilities. (FREIRE, 2020, p. 58).

The "sentence forming" that Paulo Freire talks about allows us to infer approximations with the analytical method of literacy. This consideration takes into account the clues pointed out in the author's explanation, starting with the word "sentence" and that in this activity he resumes the writing of known words and from them elaborates the sentences. A resource that involved valuing children's understanding of the work in progress, one of the concerns of the analytical methods, which:

start from the whole to the parts and seek to break radically with the principle of decipherment. The best known are the methods [...] of sentencing and verbiage. The defense of working with meaning in literacy is present in this methodological movement. [...] they focus on comprehension, understanding that the written language should be taught to the child respecting his/her global perception of the phenomena and of the language itself. The unit of analysis is taken to be the word, the sentence, and the text. [...] they assume that, based on global recognition as an initial strategy, learners can subsequently carry out a process of analysis of smaller units of language. (FRADE, 2005, p. 22).

The orientation of the time was to work on literacy with children through sentencing. In this direction, the pedagogical literature of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, among others, we cite the *First Reading Book*, by Maria Guilhermina Loureiro de Andrade (1894), cited by Ferreira and Santos (2014), worked in this perspective. Thus, this proposition started by identifying the words known by the students through the sentences presented and then suggested reorganizing new systematizations. Other references advocated starting the activities with an illustration accompanied by a short story, a situation that occurred in São Paulo:

The process based on ‘short stories’ was institutionalized in São Paulo through the publication of the document ‘*Practical instructions for teaching reading by the analytical method – sample lessons*’ (General Directorate of Public Instruction/SP - [1915]). In this document, the ‘short histories’ (a set of sentences related to each other by logical connections) was prioritized as the core of meaning and the starting point for teaching reading. The spelling books produced in the 2nd moment in the history of literacy, **especially at the beginning of the 20th century**, were programmatically based on the analytical marching method (word and sentence processes), seeking to adapt to the official instructions, [...]. (MORTATTI, 2000, p. 7, emphasis added).

Although we have stated that Eunice Vasconcelos’ way of working was close to the analytical method of sentencing, it is necessary to say that we are referring to her way of working, since there is no mention of the use of any specific didactic material in Paulo Freire’s literacy process, neither at school nor at home. The educator even expressed a strong rejection of empiricist methodologies (WEISZ, 2002): “Instead of a boring spelling book or, worse, and ‘ABC Table’ for memorizing the letters of the alphabet, [...] I have my backyard – my first world – as my first school. [...]”. (FREIRE, 2020, p. 57-58).

Another important element in Paulo Freire’s literacy process concerns the relationships between home and school. He stated that there were not many changes in the way of learning and teaching in these two environments. An occurrence that reiterates studies on the good school performance of children coming from places that frequently use the social practices of writing. From this perspective, school functions as an extension of home, such is the familiarity of the learner with formal language: “Generally, middle-class children [...], have a certain knowledge about the social functions of writing. [...]”. (FERREIRO, 1991, p. 72). The author’s own work on the relationship between the reading family space and the school institution constitutes a critical perception present in his texts: “[...] The children of these families are the only ones to do well in exams and get good grades. [...] they have access to science and technology. [...]”. (FREIRE; MACEDO, 1990, p. 120).

We also point out as a relevant aspect in his history of acquisition of the written language, the relationship between teaching and discourse: “[...]. Eunice continued and deepened my parents’ work. With her, reading the word, the phrase, and the sentence never entailed a break with ‘reading’ the world. [...]”. (FREIRE, 1989, p. 11).

This experience was later theorized as a prominent element in the expansion and deepening of formal knowledge, with regard to the responsibilities of teaching in the formative processes: “[...] the good teacher is the one who manages to draw the student to the intimacy of his/her thought process while speaking. The class then becomes a challenge [...]” (FREIRE, 2002, p. 52). Nita Freire reported the educator’s recognition of the language area as an affinity built from living with the teacher:

When Eunice taught me, she was a little girl, a young 16 or 17 years old girl. She was the first to call me with regard to an unquestionable love that I have today, and have had for a long time, for the problems of language and particularly those of the Brazilian language... but it is as if [she] had said to me, still a small child, ‘Paulo, look how beautiful the way *we* speak is!...’. (FREIRE, 2017, p. 52).

As we have already mentioned, Paulo Freire went to school in 1927, when he was 6 years old, during the First Republic. According to studies on the History of Brazilian Education, among other characteristics, this period was marked by presenting: “[...] a framework of educational demand that well characterized the needs felt by the population [...], represented the educational requirements of a society whose rate of urbanization and industrialization was still low. [...]”. (ROMANELLI, 1980, p. 45).

Thus we can understand that the social exclusion related to the access to school provided by the Brazilian State in this period was very big, because there was no organized school system: “There was not a network of respectable public schools, and the one that existed was focused on the economically favored classes”. (GHIRALDELLI JR, 1990, p. 27). Given this social situation, the absence of accessible public schools, and possibly Paulo Freire’s age at the time, the alternative left was Eunice’s private school: “[...] without an institutional uniformity, the learning of elementary knowledge took place in the private institution, in the ‘rural school,’ [...] with a private teacher [...]”. (ARAÚJO, 2005, p. 3).

Then it was possible to understand that Paulo Freire’s formal education in childhood was marked by the initial pedagogical works of his parents. Later on, these didactic actions were extended to the teachers Amália, in 1925, when he was 4 (four) years old, and later, Eunice, in 1927, when he was 6 (six) years old. When Eunice was transferred to the interior of Pernambuco, the boy Paulo had his first encounter with public school, through the Mathias de Albuquerque Elementary School Group. (FREIRE, 2017).

#### **4 - Learning at Mathias de Albuquerque School Group**

The history of school groups starts in the 1990s as a result of the movement of renewal of studies in history of education and the confluence of two themes or research axes to which historians have turned: the history of educational institutions and the interest in school culture. [...] this history meant a rediscovery of primary education investigated on the basis of new

approaches and epistemological interpellations and explored in a multiplicity of themes and objects. [...]. (SOUZA; FARIA FILHO, 2006, p. 15).

The advent of the School Group in the Brazilian scenario constitutes a very important reference in the context of the so-called First Republic (from 1889 to 1930). This perspective has been redimensioned in the History of Education from a movement that reexamines this period through other possibilities of analysis. In this direction, “[...] the School Groups had a singular importance in the symbolic construction of the Brazilian elementary school and in the production of the childhood history in Brazil, [...]” (VIDAL, 2006, p. 5), especially for representing a reference of valorization of the formal knowledge synthesized in a determined time/space. And it is this project of public school, secular and considered modern through the School Groups that finds Paulo Freire in Recife and later in Jaboatão. A proposition of education influenced by the illuminist ideals and that sought to build an identity closer to the republican profile, as a mechanism of rupture with the previous regime:

The institutionalization of the elementary school and the production of school knowledge were linked to the project of constitution of our nationality. The unity of language, customs and traditions would be a fundamental point for the unification of the Brazilian people, at that moment shattered not only by the large contingent of immigrants, but also by what involves the break of the continuity of a tradition based on the monarchical way of life and the need to confer legitimacy to the republican life. (ROSSI, 2017, p. 165).

In this sense, the School Group as a feature of the nascent public school was part of the Pernambuco educator’s history. While still in Recife, Paulo Freire wrote brief records of his inaugural passage in the public institution in *Letters to Cristina* (2020): the Mathias de Albuquerque School Group. In this institution he referred to the teacher Áurea Bahia as one of the outstanding people in his education. This school is also mentioned in the book *Teacher, yes; aunt, no* (1997), in which the educator thanks a childhood friend: “To Albino Fernandes Vital, with whom I experienced in my distant childhood, at the Mathias de Albuquerque School Group in Recife, some of the moments of the educational practice discussed in this book”. (FREIRE, 1997, p. 4).

Perhaps the records of Mrs. Tudinha, affectionate nickname of Edeltrudes, Paulo Freire’s mother, date from this period. She used to say that he was “[...] studious and fulfilled his duties. He was not satisfied with going to class without his lessons ready. He cried too much; without being sure he knew, he did not attend class, it was hard to convince him”. (FREIRE, 2017). From the required expectation, we infer that these concerns had much more to do with the School Group than the private schools in which he studied.

It was not possible to find other information regarding Paulo Freire’s experience in the Mathias de Albuquerque School Group or in the other public elementary school he attended afterwards. However, the memories of this period are present in many of the educator’s works, only focused on a problem that marked his life history through a brutal precariousness experienced by the author and his family, the time of hunger:

It was a real and concrete hunger that had no specific date to departure [...]. Many times, with no means to resist, I felt defeated by hunger while doing my homework. Sometimes I would fall asleep learning on the table where I was studying, as if I had been drugged. I tried to fight

this hunger-induced sleep by opening my eyes really wide and fixing them, with some difficulty, on the science and history texts – that were part of my elementary school work. It was as if the words became pieces of food. (FREIRE, 2020, p. 40).

These difficult times of financial hardship are, therefore, directly related to the beginning of his school life in the public sphere, as one of his biographers records: “I went to elementary school exactly during the hardest period of hunger. Not of the intense ‘hunger’, but of a sufficient hunger to hinder learning”. (GADOTTI, 2004, p. 32).

Paulo Freire reflected these processes as contexts of critical understanding, establishing relationships between the temporalities of childhood and adulthood “[...]. My lived experiences as a boy and as a man took place socially within the history of a dependent society in which terrible dramatic nature I participated early on. [...]”. (FREIRE, 2020, p. 39). Analyses point out that this period meant a time of hard learning: “Paulo Freire boy already realizes that, [...] the dominated internalizes and reproduces the values of the dominant [...] this state of affairs will necessarily require a cultural and, more specifically, educational transformation.” (KOHAN, 2018, p. 6).

A very close friend, Moacir Gadotti, informs that at the age of 8 (eight), which has already been mentioned in this text, the family of the little Pernambucanian was impacted by the economic crisis of 1929 in such a way that in the early 1930s they had to go and live in Jaboatão. And after the death of his father, in 1934, the poverty situation, which was already bad, got even worse. This context of precariousness had repercussions on the delay of their schooling. (GADOTTI, 2004).

Nita Freire, researcher and widow of the educator, summarized his trajectory in elementary school by bringing the names of two other teachers: “It was in Jaboatão, with Cecília Brandão and Odete Antunes as tutors, that Paulo finished elementary school, after having attended the ‘little schools’ of Amália Costa Lima and Eunice Vasconcelos, and, for a short time, the Matias de Albuquerque School Group in Recife”. (FREIRE, 2017, p. 57).

Undeniably, the names Eunice, Áurea and Cecília (FREIRE, 2001) are Paulo Freire’s most significant school references in the field of teaching, according to the educator’s memories. I also add to these memories the Mathias de Albuquerque School Group, the only public school that it was possible to identify during his elementary school career:

Only two other teachers besides Eunice, from whom I learned how to form sentences, marked me: Áurea, in Recife and Cecília, in Jaboatão. The other elementary schools that I attended were boring and mediocre, although I have no bad feelings toward the teachers in those schools (FREIRE, 2020, p. 59).

After finishing elementary school, it was only at the age of 16 (sixteen) that Paulo Freire started to attend high school in Recife, since there were no such schools in Jaboatão. At first, he studied at Chateaubriand French School, and later on at Oswaldo Cruz School, as a scholarship student, a relevant formative space in his memory. The educator’s secondary school trajectory represents a new challenge, important for the History of Education.

A study that can certainly strengthen the sources of memorial data if the work considers these possibilities that articulate the narratives of the personal self with the social self (NEVES, 2010). Repercussions of the fertile thought of the Patron of Brazilian Education that needs many interpretations, many readings of the world: “Much has been written about Paulo Freire. And much will be written. Sometimes I wonder where so much has come from about an author who insisted on emphasizing that simplicity was a fundamental characteristic of his pedagogical proposal”. (CASALI, 1998, p. 95).

## Final Considerations

The History of Literacy can be thought and developed from the perspective of its learners. This possibility has been made possible by the use of memorials, important historiographic sources that can be located in autobiographical and biographical narratives. These are records that allow access to relevant clues about particular aspects of learning to read and write. This mobilization was the starting point for this study.

The academic interest sought to understand how Paulo Freire learned to read and write. The cultural practices of language through the uses of orality, reading and writing were present in the educator's life, especially in early childhood. Perhaps because of this context, he started literacy classes with his parents in the backyard of their house and at the age of 4 (four) he already attended Amália Costa Lima's private school, going later to the school belonging to Eunice Vasconcelos. He was 6 (six) years old when he first met public education at the Mathias de Albuquerque School Group in Recife. In Jaboatão, she studied with Cecília Brandão and Odete Antunes and thus could finally finish elementary school. Teachers, never aunts.

Paulo Freire's narratives about the history of his literacy allowed us to understand that he learned to read and write at home, from his parents, without spelling books, with words related to his context. From an early age, his conception of literacy was a set of learning processes involving the binomial of social condition and formal knowledge, inseparable pedagogical aspects in the different pedagogies he produced. He rejected the mechanistic propositions of the time installed in the educational discussion, whose repercussions echoed throughout his works.

It was possible to observe that some elements observed in the context of Paulo Freire's literacy up to elementary school had repercussions in the life and profession of the educator, expressed in several ways: the search for a meaningful literacy for the "ragged of the world" (1989), the articulation between reading the world and the world of reading, the importance of the reality of the learner in the school context; the inseparable relations between orality, reading and writing, the binomial of teaching and discourse, among others. And fundamentally, the experiences of solidarity with his family and teachers may have been important for him to face the pains of hunger and poverty that, instead of causing revolt, contributed to his political, educational, and humanistic development.

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