

The awakening of critical literacy among PROEJA– Ifes students: reading the work "Quarto de Despejo" for the formation of critical readers¹

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how reading the book '*Quarto de Despejo*' (published in English as '*Child of the Dark*') contributes to the development of critical literacy in students enrolled in the PROEJA program (National Program for the Integration of Professional Education with Basic Education in the Modality of Youth and Adult Education). The research adopted a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews conducted with four PROEJA students to understand their perceptions and reflections based on the reading. The analysis was grounded in Paulo Freire's theoretical assumptions, linking literary content to the formation of critical readers. Results indicate that students identified with the portrayed social inequalities, which fostered the problematization of reality, the development of critical consciousness, and a desire for social transformation. This study concludes that the use of socially meaningful literary texts with EJA/PROEJA students enhances critical thinking and promotes the emancipation of these subjects.

KEYWORDS: Critical literacy. Youth and Adult Education. Critical Consciousness. Literary Education.

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*O despertar da conscientização crítica em alunos do Proeja – Ifes:
leitura da obra "Quarto de Despejo" para a formação de leitores críticos*

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa como a leitura do livro 'Quarto de despejo' contribui para o desenvolvimento do letramento crítico em alunos do Proeja. A pesquisa adotou abordagem qualitativa, de caráter exploratório e descritivo, com entrevistas semiestruturadas realizadas com quatro estudantes do Proeja, buscando compreender suas percepções e reflexões a partir da leitura da obra. A análise fundamentou-se nos pressupostos teóricos de Paulo Freire, articulando o conteúdo literário à formação de leitores críticos. Os resultados evidenciaram identificação dos alunos com as desigualdades sociais retratadas o que favoreceu a problematização da realidade, o desenvolvimento da consciência crítica e a vontade de transformação social. Com este estudo, chega-se à conclusão de que o uso de textos literários socialmente significativos com os alunos da EJA/Proeja potencializa o pensamento crítico e promove a emancipação dos sujeitos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Letramento crítico. Educação de Jovens e Adultos. Conscientização. Educação Literária.

*Despertar la conciencia crítica en los estudiantes de Proeja-Ifes: la lectura
del libro "Quarto de Despejo" para la formación de lectores críticos*

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza cómo la lectura del libro "Quarto de Despejo" contribuye al desarrollo de la literacidad crítica en estudiantes del Proeja. La investigación adoptó un enfoque cualitativo, de carácter exploratorio y descriptivo, con entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a cuatro estudiantes de Proeja, buscando comprender sus percepciones y reflexiones a partir de la lectura de la obra. El análisis se fundamentó en los postulados teóricos de Paulo Freire, articulando el contenido literario con la formación de lectores críticos. Los resultados mostraron la identificación de los estudiantes con las desigualdades sociales retratadas, lo que favoreció la problematización de la realidad, el desarrollo de la conciencia crítica y el deseo de transformación social. Este estudio concluye que el uso de textos literarios

socialmente significativos con estudantes de EJA/Proeja potencia el pensamiento crítico y promueve la emancipación de las personas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Literacidad crítica. Educación de jóvenes y adultos. Concientización. Educación literaria.

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Introduction

PROEJA (National Program for the Integration of Professional Education with Basic Education in the Modality of Youth and Adult Education) aims to educate young people and adults who moved away from regular schooling, offering them opportunities for academic and professional qualification. Students enrolled in this educational track are predominantly working-class individuals from popular backgrounds, bearing the daily fatigue and discouragement arising from economic realities within their context.

Despite these challenges, Caetano and Santos (2019) emphasize that these students possess a desire to improve their living conditions, particularly economic ones. They seek an education integrated with technical training within PROEJA to enable their entry into the labor market under better conditions than those experienced before re-enrolling, thus helping them confront the social issues that drive demotivation and school dropout.

Given this reality, professional training and human education must remain inseparable, as these dimensions constitute fundamental components of an individual's holistic growth. This comprehensive development is linked to the stimulation of reflection, which, according to Freire (1987), fosters human freedom and growth, moving away from an educational model centered exclusively on market-driven workforce preparation.

We maintain that reading can cultivate students' critical thinking, encouraging them to question and reflect critically upon their own reality, transforming this practice into a political act. Grounded in this framework, this study—anchored in the principles of Critical Literacy (Aguiar, 2021, 2022, 2023,

2024; Duboc, 2014; Jordão, 2016; Sardinha, 2018; Freire, 1979, 1987)—aims to analyze how the guided reading of the book "*Quarto de Despejo – Diário de uma Favelada*" by Carolina Maria de Jesus, conducted within a PROEJA class at the Instituto Federal do Espírito Santo (IFES), can contribute to the development of critical readers and the awakening of critical consciousness (conscientização) in these subjects. This consciousness is understood here as the process through which an individual shifts from a naive perception of reality to a reflective interpretation, becoming capable of recognizing and acting upon surrounding social conditions.

It is important to emphasize that the focus of this study does not lie in a traditional literary analysis, but rather on Critical Literacy as a philosophical-educational perspective. It investigates how a literary work serves as a starting point for subjects to "read the world" and transform their visions of social reality.

The justification for this research is anchored in the material reality of PROEJA subjects and the contradictions inherent to the Brazilian educational and labor landscapes. While the educational system tends to commodify schooling merely as preparation for employment, students' lived experiences reveal a precarious labor market that, paradoxically, repels knowledge. Diverging from this narrow perspective, this work seeks to reaffirm the importance of holistic education, wherein students can recognize themselves as fundamental social actors and assume ownership as protagonists in transforming their lived realities.

Thus, we understand that critical literacy presents itself as an essential philosophical-educational perspective (Aguiar, 2023) in this process. It allows students to identify with the issues depicted in *Quarto de Despejo*, recognizing that these structural problems span across Brazilian history, intertwining with their daily routines and remaining highly contemporary.

From this perspective, this qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive research supports the hypothesis that critical literacy can encourage readers to position themselves against social discourses, thereby recognizing relations of domination, resistance, and transformation. We believe that reading Carolina Maria de Jesus's work strengthens the development of this literacy, fostering

dialogue between experiences, stimulating the valuation of reading and writing as instruments of transformation, and awakening within students the pursuit of social change in their own contexts.

Critical Literacy: Concept, Origins, and Evolution

According to Aguiar (2022), critical literacy (CL) is a multifaceted educational perspective established as an interdisciplinary field of study. Its contemporary conceptualization integrates diverse theoretical frameworks. Aguiar (2023) highlights several frameworks that contributed to what we now define as critical literacy: "the knowledge of Critical Theory, Freire's Critical Pedagogy, specific tenets of Postmodern thought, notions originating from Post-Structuralism, and contributions from Literacy Studies." According to the author:

[...] the dialogue among all these philosophical foundations allows today for an interdisciplinary view of what we understand as Critical Literacy. Furthermore, all these theoretical perspectives put into discussion point toward the same direction: a social view of human relations and humanity, and beyond that, the non-passivity of the subject in the face of discourses. (Aguiar, 2022, p. 66)

Aguiar (2023), in his work "Aprendendo a leitura perversa do mundo", asserts that more than a methodology, CL is a pedagogical proposal of a philosophical-educational-cultural nature. It configures itself as a philosophy of life (Jordão, 2016) and a perspective guiding the search for alternative solutions to social problems, inequalities, and injustices.

Seeking to understand the meaning of "critical" within CL, Aguiar (2023) explains that the origin of the term dates back to Ancient Greece, with the Greek word *kritikós*, meaning "to judge" or "to discern." During that period, critique was bound to the study of texts and works, seeking to comprehend their original meaning in the face of contextual and linguistic changes. Being "critical" was synonymous with "critique as erudition,"

where the accumulation of knowledge enabled one to judge, take a stand, and discern between good and bad, right and wrong.

In Modernity, this notion expanded. Critique developed a link with philosophy, proving to be an active practice to analyze the past, question the present, and reconstruct knowledge, while taking social and political dimensions into account. For philosophers like Kant (2001), critique became a way to analyze the limits of reason and knowledge, moving beyond the simple reading of texts to question their validity. In this manner,

[...] what the philosopher truly intended was far more audacious than discerning between a good text and a mediocre one, or defining which author writes better; his intention was to define whether the prevailing current of thought in Europe until then—metaphysics—was actually possible, thereby paving the way for more rationalist (human reason), positivist, and scientific thought, which underpin the idea of Modern science. (Aguiar, 2023, p. 43)

Karl Marx, on the other hand, introduced social and historical dimensions to the notion of critique, showing that critique should unveil the contradictions of society and serve as an instrument for transformation and emancipation. This was achieved through his materialist-dialectic view, which incorporated natural, rational, political, social, and technological factors of a society without denying Greek or Kantian theory. From this perspective, Aguiar (2023, p. 43) states that "Marxist critique exhibits concerns with social transformation—which later would convert into one of the primary objectives of Critical Theory."

Stemming from this Marxist heritage, Critical Theory was developed by generations of philosophers from the Frankfurt School, who viewed critique not merely as analysis, but as action directed toward transforming reality in pursuit of a fairer society. The purpose was to promote profound reflection on modern society and contribute to its transformation, overcoming the limitations of traditional theory, which limited itself to describing and explaining social phenomena.

In turn, Foucault (1990) introduced another crucial perspective: for him, critique is a form of resistance against power. Within this framework, being critical means questioning blind obedience to authorities that exercise control, configuring an "art of not being governed quite so much" (Foucault, 1990, p. 19)—that is, a practice of resistance and freedom. This criticality is not confined to a passive attitude; it involves a specific way of thinking, speaking, and acting that establishes a unique relationship with existence, knowledge, actions performed, society, culture, and other individuals. This stance of resistance can be understood as a critical attitude.

Thus, critique manifests as an active practice of questioning and transforming social and cultural relations. The French philosopher introduces an analytical lens of resistance against governmentality (the art of governing), which, in this context, is viewed as the "art of not being governed" or the "art of not being governed like that and at that cost" (Foucault, 1990, p. 19). Building on this vision, Aguiar (2023) explains this notion of critique as one of confrontation, highlighting the importance of creating the right to question injustices and illegitimate forms of power, grounded in the practice of freedom and deliberation, revealing the boundaries of knowledge exercised by authority.

Therefore, according to Foucault (1990), the critical subject is one who reflects and makes decisions autonomously, practicing freedom and an aptitude for deliberation. This subject possesses the ability to investigate and challenge power mechanisms and their underlying interests, demanding an attitude of resistance over compliance with coercion.

Synthesizing this historical overview of the term critical and approaching the realm of Critical Literacy, Nardi (2024) asserts that being critical means recognizing that facts are not absolute truths, but rather subject to multiple interpretations. This is because they are comprehended through different perspectives, each grounded in specific ways of thinking, being, acting, interacting, believing, knowing, feeling, and evaluating—in essence, within diverse discourses. We perceive, then, that thinking critically within CL involves

the capacity to problematize that which was hitherto accepted as fact, reflexively revealing and deconstructing what was previously considered merely given.

This vision of non-passivity among subjects facing discourses, alongside an ethical commitment to challenge inequality and oppression, imposes the necessity for a movement that stretches beyond mere reflection: action and social transformation—thoughts deeply embedded in the philosophy of Paulo Freire, which we discuss in the next section.

Paulo Freire: critical literacy, critical pedagogy, and conscientization

As explored in the previous section, the term "critical" transitioned through various historical phases, acquiring multiple dimensions before reaching what we now call Critical Literacy—a philosophical-educational perspective that intends to "[...] problematize situations of social inequalities and injustices that crush minoritized majorities⁴ and marginalized populations, in search of a better society" (Aguiar, 2023, p. 62). This aspiration of CL dialogues directly with Freire's (1979) concept of critical consciousness (or conscientização), since developing critical literacy can contribute to perceiving critical consciousness as bound to the acts of reading and writing, connecting the word to reality and challenging ideological domination. Based on Freire's (1979) studies, it is understood that the concept of critical consciousness is linked to the process of conscientização and his philosophy of liberatory education. The pedagogue highlights that to achieve a genuinely critical consciousness, one must position themselves at a level where reality is faced as

⁴ Aguiar (2023) proposes the term "minoritized majorities" to problematize the inadequacy of the label "minorities" when used to designate groups that, in many contexts, constitute the majority or a significant portion of the population. Women, Black people, and other historically marginalized groups, for example, often outnumber those holding positions of power yet continue to be discursively and politically reduced to the status of "minorities." Minoritization, therefore, does not refer to the number of individuals but to the historical process of generating inequalities that restricts access to power, representation, knowledge production, and social recognition. The concept of "minoritized majorities" thus highlights how large segments of the population are symbolically flattened by the category of "minorities," obscuring their significant demographic presence and shifting the analytical focus away from the relations of domination that effectively relegate them to a subordinate position.

something capable of being known and interpreted. Through this movement, the human being ceases to be a mere spectator of the world and begins to assume the role of a subject of knowledge, capable of understanding and transforming reality through a reflective and active posture. For the educational philosopher:

[...] *conscientização* is, in this sense, a reality test. The more *conscientização*, the more reality is 'unveiled', the deeper one penetrates the phenomenic essence of the object before which we find ourselves for analysis. For this very reason, *conscientização* does not consist of 'standing before reality' assuming a falsely intellectual position. *Conscientização* cannot exist outside of 'praxis', or rather, without the act of action–reflection. This dialectical unity constitutes, permanently, the way of being or transforming the world that characterizes men. (Freire, 1979, p. 15)

In short, according to the ideas of Aguiar (2024), the process of *conscientização* is profoundly linked to dialogic education, which values dialogue as an essential instrument to form critical and socially engaged subjects. The author explains that this process is not confined to the transmission of knowledge, but involves the problematization of the social and ideological structures that shape knowledge. Thus, dialogue becomes an active medium for the transformation and humanization of the world.

Therefore, the articulation between Critical Literacy and the premises of Paulo Freire configures an educational practice that surpasses the limits of mechanical reading. The objective is to foster praxis—the inseparable union between reflection and action—allowing the reading of a literary work to operate as a political tool so that subjects may critically read their context and act in pursuit of social justice.

Driven by this assumption, we perceive that the aforementioned concepts (critical literacy, *conscientização*, dialogic education) share the necessity of understanding discourses contextually. Consequently, according to Nardi (2024), they require students to learn to question the legitimacy of ideas, situating

discourse critically within its context. For this to happen, it is indispensable that the teacher's work be bound to this practice aligned with Critical Literacy—an action aiming to break with common sense, destabilizing hegemonic cultural patterns, interrogating power relations, discourses, ideologies, and stabilized identities in search of social transformation (Carbonieri, 2016). Let us observe how this can transpire in the school environment.

Critical Literacy and Praxis in the Classroom

Nardi (2024), in her studies on Critical Pedagogy, asserts that the pedagogical work of Critical Literacy (CL) in the classroom can promote praxis, a Marxist concept defining the indissociable union between action and reflection. From this perspective, CL conceives reading, writing, and learning as acts of intervention for social change. However, according to Freire (1979), this shift only occurs if praxis is guided by an awareness of reality's contradictions, aiming at the liberation and emancipation of the subjects; therefore, fostering genuinely critical reflection is what enables a transformational praxis

For this to be achievable, Bezerra (2017) emphasizes Freire's famous phrase, 'reading the world precedes reading the word.'. This statement, according to the author, confirms the idea that classroom activities must be anchored in the social experiences, lived histories, and needs of the students. Thus, a movement contrary to the traditional model is proposed: instead of starting solely from textbooks, it is necessary to direct teaching toward the concrete realities of the students. Although this is a challenging and gradual path, it is entirely viable.

From this Freirian standpoint, within the proposal developed with the PROEJA class through the reading of "*Quarto de Despejo*", the presiding teacher sought reference in the analysis of the students' lived experiences and needs. Carolina Maria de Jesus's diary brought concrete realities that dialogued with the students' experiences, and from these, the students were able to reflect and voice perceptions regarding their own reality.

It is important to emphasize the teacher's function in this process of connecting reading, literature, and the concrete experiences of students. According to Sardinha (2018, p. 11), "the teacher's performance is of vital importance in the pedagogical process, given that it falls upon this professional, among other duties, to be a mediator in the formation of citizens and future professionals, as social agents." Such a role leads the teacher to operate as a literacy agent (Kleiman, 1995), who defines it as a social actor capable of actively contributing to the construction of knowledge, demanding a more autonomous and collaborative posture to allow a more effective participation from students.

It is worth noting that teachers need to understand their role as agents of change just as much as students do, but by readjusting relationships within the school space toward a perspective of negotiated hierarchy. This action, according to Aguiar (2023), anticipates that teachers and students negotiate meanings to balance their roles in school. It is not a matter of reversing functions, but of maintaining the teacher's responsibility while openly defining limits and possibilities to construct knowledge together.

In this manner, it is observable that CL enables the school to become a collaborative environment shared by active and intelligent subjects, who possess knowledge and cultural experiences that must be recognized and leveraged in school practices. For CL, it is essential that teachers and students recognize themselves as participants in this process of valuing knowledge, and that educators adopt a critical stance before the different modes of meaning production present in society.

Youth and Adult Education and Literary Reading: A Practice of Freedom

In order for the previous discussion regarding Critical Literacy and praxis to materialize in the classroom, it is necessary to characterize more precisely the subjects and the educational modality in which this research is inserted. Youth and Adult Education (EJA), of which PROEJA is a modality, constitutes a right to historical reparation for subjects who, due

to various socio-economic reasons, had their access to schooling interrupted or denied at the regular age (Haddad; Di Pierro, 2000).

It comprises, therefore, a public mostly made up of adult workers who balance evening school life with full-time daytime work shifts, which imposes concrete challenges such as physical fatigue, dropout, and discontinuity of studies. At the same time, these subjects bring with them a repertoire of lived experiences, popular wisdom, and readings of the world which, if properly valued, become pedagogical potentialities rather than obstacles for the comprehensive development envisioned by PROEJA, where professional qualification walks alongside human and civic education.

In this sense, through a Freirian lens, activities developed within EJA must transcend the mere acquisition of reading and writing skills, configuring themselves as an act of knowledge and a practice of freedom (Scopel; Oliveira; Ferreira, 2017). In the context of EJA, according to Sanceverino (2016), dialogue is an action that must serve as the foundation of pedagogical practice, because

[...] through the dialogic mediation that occurs within classroom interactions, learning subjects produce intellectual strategies that will allow them to produce or appropriate knowledge. This dialogic movement enhances self-mediation (internalization), allowing the subject to free themselves from their naive consciousness and reach thresholds of signification that simple exposure to stimuli or physical and cognitive experiences with objects of knowledge would not provide. (Sanceverino, 2016, p. 460)

It is within this scenario that dialogue establishes itself as the bedrock of pedagogical practice in EJA, since, according to Freire (1987), true education cannot dispense with the word spoken with the other—that is, the dialogic exchange that recognizes the student as a subject of knowledge and not a mere recipient of content. Furthermore, Freire (1987) posits that dialogue is the primary form of communication, and without it, there can be no true education. According to the philosopher:

[...] existence, because it is human, cannot be silent or mute, nor can it nourish itself on false words, but rather on true words, with which men transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to pronounce the world, to modify it. The uttered world, in turn, returns as a problem to the subjects who pronounced it, demanding of them a new pronouncing. (Freire, 1987, p. 92)

Dialogue in EJA is an indispensable strategy for the teacher to respect the student's experiential knowledge, encouraging them to problematize their reality through critical reflection. This, in turn, should lead to engagement in the political struggle to transform conditions of oppression and exploitation (Sanceverino, 2016). This process is the result of integrating a reflective understanding of reality with the active exercise of citizenship—a process termed by Freire (1987) as praxis. Such a perspective is strongly tied to the concept of critical literacy, summoning learners to interpret, position themselves, and intervene within the context they live in, because “[CL] considers reading as a tool to act in society and a medium for social transformation” (Nardi, 2024, p. 86).

Based on this premise, the EJA teacher must provide opportunities in the classroom for students to dialogue and reflect on their reality. In the context of Portuguese Language classes, the best pathway is through literature; in this regard, literary reading functions as a space for listening, problematization, and critical reflection, as it mobilizes experiences, affections, and worldviews, expanding repertoires and strengthening the authorship of the adult student. Thus, literature ceases to be merely content and becomes social practice.

Consequently, it is important that literary work in Youth and Adult Education moves beyond instrumental or linguistic dimensions; it must position itself as a human right. As Candido (2011) argues, literature possesses a humanizing function, for it develops reflection, knowledge acquisition, emotional refinement, and the capacity to penetrate life's problems within individuals. The experience of literary reading enables one to appreciate both

the beauty and expressiveness of a language and to better comprehend the surrounding social environment (Rodrigues; Santos, 2019).

For literature to fulfill its humanizing and critical role, the selection of works that problematize social reality is fundamental. According to Sardinha (2018), it is up to the teacher, as a literacy agent, to mediate this choice so that texts dialogue with the class's cultural repertoire. It was based on this principle that the pedagogical proposal analyzed here opted for reading works of marginal/periphery literature, exemplified by Carolina Maria de Jesus's "*Quarto de Despejo*", due to its power to generate identification and allow students to recognize, within the author's narrative, structural problems that intertwine with their own daily lives.

In this regard, Aguiar (2023) argues that reading, when performed under a philosophical-educational-cultural perspective, allows the individual to become more conscious and autonomous to transform their reality. Literary reading, therefore, starts to configure itself as a space for listening, problematizing, and critically reflecting, mobilizing experiences, affects, and worldviews, thereby contributing to the human education of young people and adults who often had restricted access to written culture throughout their lives.

Based on these principles, the next section describes how these foundations were mobilized in the work with the PROEJA class, detailing the instruments and stages of the investigative journey.

Methodology

To achieve the proposed objectives, this research adopts a qualitative approach of an exploratory and descriptive nature, intending to understand the participants' perceptions in a deep manner. According to Gil (2017), exploratory research allows for greater familiarity with the investigated problem, enabling the construction of hypotheses and an initial understanding of the phenomenon. Descriptive research, on the other hand, aims to detail the characteristics of a given population or phenomenon, providing an accurate portrayal of the participants' perceptions.

The qualitative approach is appropriate for this study because, according to Minayo (2012, p. 625), it concentrates on understanding meanings, values, and experiences lived by the participants, considering the social context in which they are embedded. In this manner, the author states that, "[...] qualitative research is a means to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups attribute to a socio-educational phenomenon." We opted for this approach because it concerns a study seeking to interpret the perceptions and reflections of PROEJA students facing the reading of a literary text with heavy social weight, valuing subjectivity and the complexity of responses.

Data production was conducted with four PROEJA students through semi-structured interviews – a method in which the researcher crafts a guide with core questions⁵ while leaving room for the interviewee to express their ideas freely, requiring planning and preparation from the interviewer to ensure the depth of the conversation (Oliveira, Guimarães, Ferreira, 2023). The analysis will follow an interpretative approach, grounded in the assumptions of critical literacy in dialogue with the Freirian perspective, seeking to articulate the literary content of the work with the formation of critical and socially engaged readers.

Context and participants

The research was conducted within a class of the Metallurgy course of the National Program for the Integration of Professional Education with Basic Education in the Modality of Youth and Adult Education (PROEJA), at the Federal Institute of Espírito Santo (Ifes), Vitória campus. This class consisted of 16 students, and from this total, 4 students were selected to participate in the interviews. As suggested by Flick (2009), the choice of this group was intentional to guarantee that the subjects possessed a direct relationship with the object of

⁵ Questions prepared for the survey: "What feelings or reflections arose regarding your own life or the reality you know?" "Are there similarities between the author's story and experiences you have lived through or are familiar with?" "Did reading the book teach you about the hardships and inequalities involved in the struggle for better living conditions?" "Did you come to view your own reality—and the reality of those around you—differently? In what way?"

study; in this sense, the selection criterion for the 4 participants stemmed from the observations of both researchers during classroom debates about the book, selecting those students who were most involved in discussions and who freely volunteered to lead the debate and exemplify points of discussion.

All participants balance evening study with full-time daytime work, a common condition among students of Youth and Adult Education. The interviews were conducted individually, with pre-scheduled times according to each student's availability, recorded in audio and later transcribed, aiming to capture perceptions about the challenges and potentialities of the schooling process, as well as the reception/identification with the work *Quarto de Despejo* by Carolina Maria de Jesus, selected for its potency to generate identification, allowing students to recognize structural problems that intertwine with their own daily lives.

To protect anonymity, fictitious names were adopted for all interviewees: Marlene, Sueli, Rogério, and Carlos. Their characteristics are recorded in the table below.

Research participants	
Name	Description
Marlene	The student is between 40 and 50 years old, works during the day as a domestic worker, and demonstrates a critical and inquisitive stance. During classes, she demonstrated constant attention, <u>participating actively and reflecting on the presented contents.</u>
Sueli	The student is between 40 and 50 years old and works as a general services assistant. During classes, despite distractions caused by fatigue, she showed herself to be joyful and communicative in conversations. When stimulated by questions, she reveals a positive attitude toward learning, <u>demonstrating interest in the contents.</u>
Rogério	The student appears to be between 40 and 50 years old, is a school secretariat assistant, and demonstrates great interest in classes. He contributes actively to debates, frequently bringing his own lived experiences, which enriches classroom discussions and brings the content closer to the participants' reality.
Carlos	The student is between 40 and 50 years old, is a bricklayer, and despite being more reserved day-to-day, participated spontaneously in debates, asking questions during classes. He demonstrated a liking for debate and got involved in discussions, contributing more actively when encouraged.

Data Production

The instrument used for production was the semi-structured interview, which, according to Triviños (1987), makes it possible to combine previously formulated questions with freedom for the interviewee to bring new information, allowing for a greater richness of detail and spontaneity. The interviews addressed questions regarding the experience of reading the work *Quarto de Despejo*, its relations with lived reality, and perceptions regarding social inequality, citizenship, and critical consciousness.

Thus, the focus resides on the deep analysis of the students and their interactions with the literary work, seeking a broad and detailed knowledge of the phenomenon. The data set for analysis comprises the transcriptions of interviews conducted with the purpose of capturing the students' reflection on the work read and debated in the classroom during Portuguese Language classes.

For data interpretation, we will utilize content analysis from the perspective of Bardin (2016), which allows for the identification of categories and subcategories from the collected material, establishing relations between the participants' discourses and the theoretical tenets of critical literacy. In this sense, observing the totality of the recordings, we can perceive certain regularities in the students' discourses that led us to construct 3 categories to organize the analyses: *i. conscientization and mobilization; ii. identification – hunger, childhood, and racism; iii. reading and studying as tools for transformation.*

Didactic Practice: The Reading of "*Quarto de Despejo*"

Pedagogical practice in the Portuguese Language discipline was structured around the reading and analysis of the work *Quarto de Despejo: Diário de uma Favelada*, by Carolina Maria de Jesus, a choice that aligns perfectly with the principles of CL. This approach defines education as inseparable from the political dimension, aiming at critical civic formation and social transformation.

Classes were conducted under a dialogic perspective, in which the teacher acted as a mediator, starting from guiding questions⁶. The reading of the book was performed in parts (weekly), allowing students to engage with the text in an intense and gradual manner. The questions served as a pedagogical tool for developing Critical Literacy, enabling the constant problematization of positions and representations conveyed in society and text. By allowing this critical reflection on civic action, the pedagogical work contributed to praxis (Freire, 1979), fulfilling Critical Literacy's objective of developing critical consciousness.

Data Analysis: CL Derived from the Book *Quarto de Despejo*

This section is organized to present the interpretations and analyses of data with a focus on CL, which consists of the ability to read a text in an active and reflective manner with the intent to comprehend power relations, inequality, and injustice in society (Sardinha, 2018). To this end, we explore the study and reading of the work *Quarto de Despejo*, by Carolina Maria de Jesus, published in 1960, which recounts her daily life in the Canindé Favela, and which proved valid for Youth and Adult Education (EJA) students due to its capacity to promote more discerning and conscious viewpoints regarding reality. What distinguishes *Quarto de Despejo* from other canonical works is its nature as marginal/periphery literature, capable of breaking the distance between high culture and popular life. By bringing concrete realities such as hunger and racism narrated in the first person, the book acts as a mirror that generates immediate identification, validating the existence and struggles of marginalized subjects and serving as a potent tool for critical consciousness.

According to Carbonieri (2016), critical literacy helps identify and combat stereotyped and prejudiced visions in relationships inside and outside the classroom. This educational approach encourages the individual

⁶ At this link, we provide the materials used by the instructor. Slides covering the author's life and work were prepared, as well as reading worksheets containing questions about the text; these questions served as the basis for the weekly classroom discussions: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1RpaqJ2J0G2249k-is6t4gcVJgEGQyy1X?usp=sharing>

to reflect on their reality, promoting awareness and autonomy to transform it, should they so desire. It questions power relations, discourses, and identities taken as fixed, offering tools to rethink one's own world and face social and cultural inequalities and oppressions.

Thus, based on Carolina Maria de Jesus's work, the interview sought to capture the experience and subjectivity of the subjects involved, encouraging the expression of more critical and reflective viewpoints. Data analysis interprets the social and cultural contexts of the interviewees and was organized to reflect the trajectory of Paulo Freire's conscientizing education, which presupposes the dialectical movement between the observation of reality, the construction of critical knowledge, and transformative intervention. Thus, three main categories were established reflecting the most cited themes: conscientization and mobilization; identification – hunger, childhood, and racism; reading and studying as tools for transformation.

Conscientization and Mobilization

For a subject to be capable of changing their reality, it is important that they reflect upon social obstacles, such as social inequality, for instance. The student Carlos's view, in this context, echoes the main objectives and philosophy of Critical Literacy (CL) and Critical Pedagogy presented in this work. CL seeks to unveil and challenge the innocent reading of the world, which is "[...] naturalized, transparent, fixed, given, and immutable" (Aguiar, 2023). Driven by this assumption, Carlos's process of conscientization becomes evident in his transition from passive acceptance to active reflection. The student initially viewed social inequality as something "dormant or seen as just how it is. Oh, it's just another case, right?", a naive perception that aligns with the naturalization of injustices that CL strives to combat.

<i>Excerpt 1: "Brazil has a debt to what people have gone through"</i>	
Interviewer	And regarding social inequality, regarding the themes that were portrayed in the book... Is there something that made you reflect more on this?
Carlos	Social inequality is something we've been witnessing for many years now, right? The book only, like, sharpened it , it's something that was dormant, right? I believe it's dormant or seen like... Ah, it's just another case, right? So, I even remember some words from the teacher regarding Brazil. Brazil has a debt with what people went through, right? The slaves, the Black people , regarding this issue. Brazil has a debt and it definitely does, right? Considering that it is a prejudiced society.
Interviewer	Did reading the book heightened your perspective on this?
Carlos	It sharpened it , draws attention to the theme... and many times it is ignored or even forgotten. People just go on living, normally, maybe treating this as common, but whoever goes through a situation like it, it is very present and alive in the life of those who suffer prejudice, who suffer discrimination. [...] We need to hold onto this issue more, mobilize and conscientize the population and people to turn more attention to a situation like this.

In his account, he affirms that the book "**sharpened**" attention toward inequality. This shows the effect of critical literacy: the transition from the problem to the conscious problematization of it. According to Freire (1979, p. 15) "[...] man cannot participate actively in history, in society, in the transformation of reality, if he is not helped to take consciousness of reality and of his own capacity to transform it." By perceiving inequality as a historical phenomenon and defending that "**We need to focus more deeply on this matter, mobilize and conscientize the population,**" the student perceives the importance of action stemming from praxis. Here, reading the work operates as a motivator of consciousness and as an instrument for reading the world, which precedes reading the word.

Carlos brings the discussion into the Brazilian context when mentioning the teacher's words about the fact that Brazil has a "**debt with what people went through, right? The slaves, the Black people,**" characterizing the nation as a "prejudiced society." The book helped

"broadened his perspective" toward this reality. This analysis by the student, which connects the text with historical and current oppressions, is the essence of Critical Literacy: the ability to read a text in an active and reflective manner with the intent to comprehend power relations, inequality, and injustice in society (Sardinha, 2018).

In the following excerpt, Rogério, in his speech, exposes the understanding that discourses are not neutral, when he states **"The newspapers use the population's misery for ratings."** This conscientization is crucial to break with common sense, combating stereotyped and prejudiced visions and preventing the trivialization of social problems. It incites the problematization of reality, unmasking the economic and social structures that determine relations of exploitation and oppression.

<i>Excerpt 2: "Is he not a product of society?"</i>	
Rogério ⁷	Sometimes we don't want to see anymore, to look... but we see it, it's just that we let it be.
Interviewer	As if it were trivialized?
Rogério	We trivialize it... leave it to be resolved later... it can't be that way. [...] The newspapers use the population's misery for ratings, the guy who committed the crime... what led him to it? Is he not a product of society?

Following the analysis, Rogério's excerpt begins with a reflection on social passivity before oppression and inequality (**"Sometimes we don't want to see anymore, to look..."**), a behavior that CL and Critical Pedagogy seek to transform (Aguiar, 2023). Critical Pedagogy questions naive thinking, which accepts the present as something "normalized and well-behaved," where the primary goal is accommodation (Freire, 1970). This passive acceptance is what Critical Literacy seeks to deconstruct, promoting a reading of the world that opposes innocent reading. Such an attitude of not wanting to see reflects what Freire (1987) describes as

adherence to the dominating structure, wherein individuals fear freedom as long as they do not feel capable of fighting for it.

After describing the mechanism of trivialization, Rogério advances to a macro-social and ideological critique by questioning the role of the media and the origin of crime. This second part of Rogério's speech is the materialization of Critical Literacy in action, for he ceases to focus solely on the individual and turns his gaze toward power structures (Aguilar, 2023).

Rogério's inquiry, "Could he not be a product of society?", is deeply aligned with the foundations of CL, which understands the individual and their circumstances as social, historical, and cultural constructions. From this perspective, CL emphasizes that "the subject is a simple and pure result of a process of cultural and social production" (Silva, 2005, as cited in Aguilar, 2023). Therefore, the purpose of CL is to provide individuals with tools to question their own world perspective, their position in current power dynamics, and the identities they adopt, integrating critical literacy into civic action within the social context.

Identification – Hunger, Childhood and Racism

When students see themselves reflected in Carolina Maria's experiences, the accounts transform harsh childhood memories and explain the present. Critical Literacy (CL) emphasizes that interpretations of texts are tied to personal experiences and the cultural background of each individual (Sardinha, 2018). The student Rogério demonstrates this connection, manifesting a profound identification with the narrative due to his own experience of material deprivation, identifying with Carolina Maria de Jesus's struggle for provision and food.

<i>Excerpt 3: "she would take out a spoonful for herself"</i>	
Interviewer	And did you ever reach a situation like her children, of hunger?
Rogério	Yes, because many times when I got home, my brother and I would sometimes split an egg between three people. And it was like that... the egg, divided between three. And we learned that. Nobody went without. So we would share a plate with two people... more or less like that. So, sometimes, she would take a spoonful for herself.
Interviewer	Did your mother do that?
Rogério	She would make something, take a spoonful. And she'd say it was just to keep her going, because the rest she made, she'd send to us, right? Her children were her priority. Priority. [...] Today, when I see people like that, I think it was a generation that was raised with so many difficulties. [...] We experienced the 80s. Even the teaching profession itself was fighting for improvements. To have its place. The teachers, they suffered with us. For example, when we went to school, which sometimes didn't have classes, I felt sorry because there wouldn't be food that day, you know?
Interviewer	And at the time, what series had you finished?
Rogério	At the time, I had finished the eighth grade. [...] I went to work in construction as a construction worker's assistant. And it's very hard work, I couldn't concentrate because it's very tiring. And I would fall asleep in class. I said, what am I doing here? I'll take a stand, and when I can, I'll come back.

Rogério's narrative about his mother's sacrifice, by affirming that she **"took out a spoonful,"** highlights severe material deprivation, illustrating how she renounced the basic minimum so that her children could have food. Furthermore, the experience of deprivation reflected in the school environment, expressed in the phrase **"there wasn't going to be food that day,"** contundently evidences the social inequalities and deprivations faced by the population. This connection between the absence of class and the absence of food demonstrates that the school functioned as a vital space for survival within a context of precarity.

His observation that fatigue made him sleep and unable to concentrate led him to a critical reflection: **"I said, what am I doing here? I'm going to take a side, when I can, I'll come back."** This reflection following exhaustion is an initial step of critical consciousness regarding the viability of reconciling both realities under such conditions, demonstrating that the problem was not a

lack of will, but the imposition of external forces interfering with education. We believe that this reflexive movement performed by Rogério reflects the ideal of CL, which seeks to foster the subject's critical consciousness, and this conscientização (Freire, 1979) configures itself as the critical effort of consciously understanding the world and its relation to reading.

By relating the reading of the work to his own history and expressing this awareness, Rogério performs a reflective posture that is the foundation for Freirian praxis—the junction of critical consciousness and civic action for social transformation. Therefore, education, when addressing relevant social problems, must assist the student who experienced hunger to become critically conscious of their place in society and to fight against inequalities, which, in this context, emerges as a fundamental path to go beyond superficial perception and problematize the economic and social structures that create this situation of exploitation and oppression.

Next, the student Marlene, a periphery resident and Black woman, reports that her reaction to the book was not driven by surprise, but rather by a recognition of the harsh reality that exists to this day in peripheral neighborhoods.

<i>Excerpt 4: "I like this thing called quotas"</i>	
Interviewer	Is there any situation that Carolina went through, or that you have experienced, related to prejudice or inequality?
Marlene	Yes, I've already experienced prejudice from someone who saw me going down in the elevator with my employer and didn't want to go down with me , choosing to go down in another elevator. [...] So, Carolina was ahead of her time, because she was someone who didn't study much back then, but she knew how to read and write, she turned around, right? You'll see that she writes things ahead of her time, that she has this knowledge today, so she was a very advanced person. What a shame that once again, because she was Black, she only received recognition in one book and not in others...
Interviewer	And you think it's because of her class, her place in society?
Marlene	I believe so, because it's no use, Bruna, you're white, I'm Black , [...] What I say, what I said to my friend, which he didn't agree with... I like this quota thing, because if there were no quotas, how could I compare my son to my boss's son? [...] What happens then? It's not that public school is bad [...]. You don't have time to stay at home, you don't have time with your son to study, for him to learn more than your boss's son.

Marlene's reflections, spanning from daily prejudice to questioning the educational system, demonstrate the urgency of an education that moves beyond superficial perceptions. She internalized the philosophy of Critical Literacy, which is based on praxis—the junction of critical consciousness about reality with civic action upon the world. Her speech on quotas is an act of resistance that seeks to create a fairer reality and defense against adversities and social transformation (**"I like this quota thing, because if quotas didn't exist, how would I compare my son with my employer's son?"**).

Upon being questioned about identification with situations of prejudice and inequality lived by Carolina Maria de Jesus, Marlene readily manifests herself, detailing how racial discrimination affects her directly. Marlene's perception that social inequalities and structural racism are deeply rooted (**"I've already suffered prejudice from one of the people who saw me coming down with the employer in the elevator and didn't want to go down with me"**) is a reflection of the understanding of Critical Pedagogy, which is based on liberatory learning and recognizes that pedagogical processes must be used to fight against white supremacist capitalist imperialist patriarchy (hooks, 2017).

This identification with oppression and the pursuit of a fairer place in society lead Marlene to manifest critical consciousness (**"You don't have time to stay at home, you don't have time with your son to study, to learn more than your employer's son."**). Attaining this consciousness is one of the central objectives of Critical Literacy, which seeks to lead individuals to contest and problematize discourses that perpetuate inequality.

Marlene's defense of racial quotas as a way to "repair" historical inequality demonstrates the manifestation of social critique (Carbonieri, 2016), which aligns with Critical Theory, which concerns itself with the alleviation of human suffering and the formation of a fairer world. By questioning the unequal competition between the public school child and the employer's child, the student unveils power relations (Carbonieri, 2016) and interrogates stabilized

ideologies and identities. CL, in this view, configures itself as a problematizing attitude or philosophical posture (Duboc, 2014).

Reading and Studying as Tools for Transformation

This topic gathers statements where students associate reading and school with processes of concrete change in their lives, expanding repertoires and strengthening their voice. In the context of EJA, where the majority reconcile daytime work and nighttime study, these accounts evidence reading as a tool for critical literacy and the school as a place where one learns to interpret the world, recognize injustices, and elaborate pathways for overcoming (academically, professionally, and as citizens). The following passages show, therefore, that "reading and studying" are not merely school activities, but practices of transformation, capable of producing autonomy, self-esteem, and social participation.

An example is Marlene's speech, which establishes a direct connection with the concept of study as social transformation and a practice of freedom within the perspective of Critical Literacy (CL). The student recognizes that reading expands learning, aligning with the idea that we, as human beings, acquire knowledge every day—everything can be learned.

<i>Excerpt 5: "I like to learn, you see?"</i>	
Interviewer	Why do you think reading the book was important?
Marlene	Because we don't have that... perspective . We don't have that habit of reading. So, if you create a habit of reading, the more you read, the more you learn from books [...]
Interviewer	And was it a pleasurable reading for you?
Marlene	For me, it was. Because even knowing that I don't have time, we have to make time to read. On Sundays, I'd spend a little time, go into my son's room, where there's a computer, and I'd do my homework, read, read, read, read, read . I'm not very good at interpretation, but I like to learn, you know?

Marlene expresses that the book's importance resides in developing a **"gaze"** and creating the habit of reading (**"we don't have this... gaze. We don't have this habit of reading. So, if you create a habit of reading, the more you read, the more you learn from books"**). The "gaze" that Marlene mentions refers to the critical consciousness or conscientização developed through the habit of reading and reflection within the perspective of Critical Literacy; the act of reading goes beyond the simple decoding of letters and sounds; it is a political act of insertion into the social world and an indispensable medium for social transformation (Freire, 1979). Reading, for Marlene, is a path to learn, which aligns with the objective of liberatory education to create possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge. This is reflected in the emphatic repetition of the verb "read" (**"read, read, read, read, read"**) in Marlene's speech, which carries a profound meaning transcending the mere description of an activity, symbolizing intense dedication within a context of difficulties.

By actively seeking knowledge, including dedicating personal time to reading and homework (**"on Sundays I'd spend a little moment, enter my son's room"**), Marlene exemplifies the capacity to overcome oppression through education. In Aguiar's (2023) understanding, CL defends that reading, when performed under a philosophical-educational-cultural perspective, allows the individual to become more conscious and autonomous to transform their reality, should they choose to do so.

Therefore, the student, by demonstrating the will to learn, reveals the epistemological curiosity that, according to Paulo Freire (1979), is essential to reach knowledge. Her desire to acquire knowledge from reading, even while recognizing technical difficulties in interpretation (**"I'm not very good at interpretation, but I like to learn, you see?"**), reinforces the vision that knowledge is a mediation between the individual and a broader social reality, and not fixed content.

Sueli's account, seen below, is a powerful testimony to the Pedagogy of the Oppressed and the principles of CL, as it articulates the overcoming of social myths with the discovery of the transforming power of knowledge.

<i>Excerpt 6: "reading was a waste of time for lazy people"</i>	
Sueli	[...] I didn't read, but I started reading. Why? Because she was a valuable person; because of her reading. And I didn't read, why didn't I read? Because, in my childhood, my mother said that reading was for lazy people. And she wanted to see us doing this, doing that, you only had peace when it got dark, when you went to sleep.
Interviewer	So, is reading accessible to everyone?
Sueli	Reading is accessible to everyone, you understand? I'm serious, nowadays my mind is open.
Interviewer	So you see, nowadays, that it's possible?
Sueli	Yes, it is possible for you to study and achieve better things for yourself.

The student reveals a personal transformation by affirming that, previously, **"I didn't read, I started reading."** The turning point was the perception that Carolina Maria de Jesus **"was a valuable person; through reading."** This is crucial because, within the perspective of Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy, liberatory education seeks to help the individual become more conscious and autonomous to transform reality. The importance of reading in Sueli's life, awakened by mirroring Carolina Maria de Jesus—who was respected in the favela because she read and wrote—is that of an engine for autonomy and critical consciousness, allowing her to break with a "closed mind" and assume an active role in transforming her own reality through reading.

Sueli exposes a clear example of oppression in her childhood, recounting the family's ignorance and the priority given to manual labor. Sueli's mother, herself raised as a slave by her grandmother, held the belief that **"reading was something for lazy people"** and wanted to see her daughter **"doing this, doing that, you only had peace when it got dark, when you went to sleep."** This mentality fits the pattern of dominating relationships reflected in households. Sueli's mother, by imposing constant manual activity and prohibiting reading, was unconsciously reproducing a system that devalues reflection and knowledge, keeping her daughter in a position of domination and

pure doing. Thus, Sueli's speech reveals the profound influence of structures of oppression on the formation of consciousness and the denial of access to knowledge—a central theme in combating social inequalities guided by CL.

Her final words, **"nowadays, my mind is open"** and **"It is possible, yes, for you to study and achieve better things for yourself,"** mirror the objective of CL to expand consciousness and reveal the countless possibilities for social mobility that the subject, even residing in the periphery, can possess (Aguiar, 2023). Reading and studying become an instrument for social change, offering Sueli the path to emancipation.

These statements evidence the process of becoming a reader and its effect on developing critical consciousness, a foundational concept of Critical Literacy (CL). The recognition of the habit of reading as a tool to **"achieve better things"** and to **"learn"** represents a rupture with oppressive common sense and aligns with the idea that CL promotes reflection, transformation, and action. By positioning themselves as active subjects in the construction of meanings, the students demonstrated the purpose of CL: "to instigate the individual to rethink their reality, helping them become more conscious and autonomous to transform it" (Carbonieri, 2016, p. 133).

Conclusion

The present research arose from the desire to investigate a literature frequently marginalized, that of Carolina Maria de Jesus. By bringing the work close to the context of EJA, the aim was to verify to what extent the literary experience can favor reflection, self-recognition, and positioning before the inequalities that traverse the daily lives of these subjects.

In accordance with Paulo Freire's premises, the research evidences that CL and literary reading functioned as instruments for the awakening of critical consciousness. This consciousness, which is the critical effort of consciously understanding the world and its relation to reading, culminated in the desire and will for social transformation and civic action. Students like Rogério, Carlos,

and Marlene demonstrated the internalization of praxis, demanding the mobilization and consciousness of the population to combat injustices.

Thus, we reach the conclusion that working with Critical Literacy in EJA/PROEJA, utilizing texts that dialogue with the reality of working students, enhances reflective thinking and promotes the emancipation of individuals, allowing them to recognize themselves as fundamental subjects and protagonists in the struggle for social change. This process reinforces the importance of holistic education, which goes beyond preparation for the labor market by stimulating reflection and human development, as proposed by Freire (1987).

In terms of contributions to the field of Youth and Adult Education, this study reinforces the centrality of Critical Literacy in EJA/PROEJA beyond the strictly linguistic dimension, demonstrating its humanizing and transforming function. For the pedagogical practice developed in PROEJA, the results suggest that the selection of works from marginal/periphery literature, capable of dialoguing with the life repertoire of working students, constitutes a concrete path to make literary reading a social practice of listening, problematizing, and action, rather than just curricular content to be fulfilled. Sustaining a more critical and humanizing EJA/PROEJA implies, therefore, guaranteeing spaces for student participation in the life of the school, so that learning means, concurrently, expanding repertoires, affirming dignities, and producing concrete interventions in the world around them.

As a limitation of the study, it is recognized that the small number of participants (four students from a single class) does not allow for generalizations, restricting itself to the deep understanding of this specific context. As a development of this research, it is suggested that future investigations expand the number of participants and PROEJA classes involved, as well as explore other works of marginal/periphery literature, so as to deepen the understanding of the effects of Critical Literacy on the formation of critical readers and citizens across different contexts of Youth and Adult Education.

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