

Language policies and language education in Brazil and Canada: an interview with Prof. Dr. Schmidt

Políticas linguísticas e educação linguística no Brasil e Canadá: entrevista com a Profa. Dra. Clea Schmidt

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Abstract: This interview with Prof. Dr. Clea Schmidt from the University of Manitoba, Canada, presents some of Schmidt's and Ferraz's perspectives in relation to language education and teacher education in Canada and Brazil. The conversation focuses on essential topics to be problematized by language educators from both countries: neoconservative politics, neoliberalism, plurilingualism, immigration, LGBTQ, pedagogical practices, language policies, and teacher education.

Keywords: Language education; Brazil. Canada; Neoliberalism; Neoconservative times.

Resumo: Esta entrevista com a Profa. Dra. Clea Schmidt da Universidade de Manitoba, Canadá, apresenta as perspectivas dos professores Schmidt e Ferraz em relação à educação linguística no Canadá e no Brasil. A conversa focaliza temas essenciais para a educação linguística em ambos os contextos: políticas neoconservadoras, neoliberalismo, plurilinguismo, imigração, comunidade LGBTQ, práticas de ensino, políticas linguísticas e formação docente.

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Palavras-chave: Educação linguística; Brasil; Canadá; Neoliberalismo; Tempos neoconservadores.

Introduction

The challenges Brazil and Canada are facing - even if at different levels - in relation to the new waves of neoconservative ultra right-wing political contexts are dire. These waves have had an enormous impact on education and on language education, in particular. In Brazil, for example, the new national official educational document, the *BNCC – Base Nacional Comum Curricular* (2018), determined that English should be the only foreign language to be taught in Brazilian schools. This is quite serious provided that this decision practically excludes many languages and undergraduate courses of modern languages and teacher education, such as Spanish, French, Italian, German, French – to mention but a few. This also leads us to other questions: What about the indigenous languages? How have official documents dealt not only with the elimination of indigenous languages, territories and cultures?

These ultra right-wing governments have also taken robust actions in relation to promoting and reinforcing neoliberalism/capitalism in all fields of knowledge; in most of these actions humanities fields (sociology, philosophy, education) are sidestepped in favour of more ‘traditional’ courses. In this interview, professor Schmidt contends that “we need to take a stronger stance and incorporate critiques of neoliberalism into teacher education and into graduate education programs”. She affirms that “we need to be deliberately and critically examine some of the taken for granted capitalist interventions in our educational system that are so pervasive and so ingrained in the way education systems operate that we failed to even see them, let alone act against them”.

Even though both Canadian and Brazilian contexts are obviously quite different at a global level, and certainly could not be discussed and problematized enough at local levels, we do think the reader will profit with the tensions and overlaps presented by both scholars in this interview. When we discuss language education and teacher education, we need to touch issues of language policies, views of language, perspectives on critique, our experiences with social class

(neoliberalism/capitalism), and eventually our hope for a more equitable world. These are some of the topics Clea and I discussed in this interview.

Finally, I would like to thank professor Schmidt for the wonderful conversation we had in 2019 in Toronto. I would also like to thank the AUCANI-USP– International Office (USP) for sponsoring this visit to Canada.

Interview

Daniel Ferraz (DF): Professor Schmidt, thank you for this interview. One of your PhD candidates at the University of Manitoba is a Brazilian student, right? Could you tell us about your views in relation to Brazil and Brazilian education?

Clea Schmidt (CS): Absolutely! And thank you Daniel for this opportunity to chat with you. I do currently have a Brazilian doctoral student I'm supervising although I also have a master's student from Brazil, and I'm on another doctoral committee with a Brazilian student. I've had several students over the years, so it's such a pleasure to meet and work with these students who mostly came to my attention through *Brazil-Canada Knowledge Exchange Project (BR-CAKE, 2009-2012)*. In fact, my current PhD student is Gustavo Moura. I had the opportunity to meet him first in Winnipeg when he came over through the ELAP Program and spent some time here in Toronto with Brian Morgan and Ian Martin at Glendon College. Gustavo came to Winnipeg to visit a friend and connected with me as a prospective supervisor. We cut it off right away and decided that I would support his application. Then, I also had an opportunity to spend some time with him in Brazil before he started the program.

I've been to Brazil twice. The first time was in November 2016, and the second time was in 2017 when I went to Rio for AILA, but I also had the opportunity to go back to Campo Grande which is where I spent the bulk of my time working with Cristina Paniago (who is a professor at the UCDB).

It has been an amazing opportunity. I've really been drawn to working with Brazilian scholars because I'm very attracted to the critical dynamic they bring to issues of language university education, and education more broadly. I find the scholarship is top notch; the thinking is very critical and I find we've been able to have very robust conversations.

There is also of course the fact that though Brazil and Canada are in very different situations at present, there certainly are some overlaps when we think for example of issues of reconciliation, and the fact that both countries are grappling with historic mistreatment of their indigenous populations and trying to figure out ways of moving forward with that. I do find that there are definitely some key conversations to be having across our contexts.

In terms of what I know about Brazilian education, my visits have been relatively short, so I had an opportunity to spend some time in a private language education school. I haven't had a chance yet to visit public schools in Brazil though this is something I certainly hope to do in a future visit. I'm aware of the very difficult situation in Brazil at present; I mean, it has historically been very difficult with a lot of corruption and the economic situation being quite volatile. But now with the election of a very neoconservative ultra right-wing president who is called by the popular media in Brazil as the Brazil's Trump, we see that the situation is particularly dire, and in light of what we were just talking about, with critical work being regarded as a threat to the political and social order, I can certainly appreciate that the issues facing academics in Brazil are particularly difficult.

I don't mean to talk about these issues or problematize the concerns in Brazil from a "sort of" arrogant perspective like: "Oh! We don't have any of those issues in the West!". Obviously, some of these issues around academic freedom; I think the struggles that academics across the world are facing at a time when neoliberal influences are predominating, and we see how this plays out in the kinds of scholarships that are funded, but I also don't mean to make light of the situation and suggest that all of our struggles are common ones because obviously I think Brazil is facing some unique challenges based on these socio-political context at the moment.

DF: Thank you. So, still thinking about contextualization, what can you tell us about Canadian language and literature education, bilingual and plurilingual education and teacher education? More specifically how has the University of Manitoba dealt with these issues?

CS: Thank you, that's a great question. Canada of course has produced some of the key scholars in this area. When we think about the work of James

Cummings (2003, 2007) which has been so pioneering and influential in language and literacy education. Also, University of Toronto colleagues Sharon Lapkin and Merrill Swain (2005) put French immersion education on the map internationally, with some of the seminal research they did in this area. I think Canada is a player in this area of contributing to scholarship in language and literacy education. When it comes to the situation of my own institution, the University of Manitoba, I would have to say that second language education or additional language education as a field of study is somewhat marginalized actually. We are not seen as a core curriculum area like math or social studies or science, and we enjoy a sort of a lesser status when compared with traditional curriculum areas. I would also have to say that some of the Programs we offer have been very much constructed within a neoliberal framework. For example, historically we offered a TESOL certificate program that was a joint initiative between the Faculty of Education and extended education which offers continuing education programs that are often non-credit in their basis, and what this meant was people could enter the TESOL program without coming through traditional University admissions procedures. They could come in for example without a University degree and take these courses out of interest.

On the one hand, that's an equalizer in giving people access to university courses, but on the other hand it yielded some very problematic dimensions in that the University was recruiting people to the TESOL program who might have been for example shop clerks who earned minimum wage but had heard that: "Well, if I can get a TESOL certificate I could go internationally and teach English and have a very lucrative career moving forward". Of course many countries will not accept educators and will not grant them visas unless they have a University degree. So, these shop clerks were spending thousands of dollars to earn a qualification that would never yield any meaningful results for them, and I had several students over the years who would contact to me years after finishing their programs saying: "I'm still just volunteering in an ESL class, but I have no hopes of ever getting a job and I'm wondering why I invested all the time and money". We see how this plays out in very complex ways that isn't necessarily advantageous to some of our students. That would be one example.

DF: And this goes for the indigenous languages as well because you have just mentioned the importance of the University of Manitoba in relation to indigenous language education. How does it work regarding indigenous languages?

CS: Yes, with respect to indigenous languages there certainly is a more political will to explore Language Programs for indigenous peoples. We don't have enough qualified professors proficient in the languages to offer the range of programming that is needed. In fact, at the University of Manitoba we have seen a very problematic trend where our Native Studies Department - as it is called - has been shrinking over the years at the same time as the universities' public commitment to the indigenous issues has grown including indigenous language education. So, what we see now is every unit across the campus wants an indigenous professor to open their conferences, to do a keynote address or to bring readings; traditional indigenous perspectives to the conversations, but the number of professors has been going down. Essentially, the universities indigenization strategy is happening on the backs of professors who are already overworked. And I think a key issue arises: Are we really indigenizing academia successfully or are we simply trying to academize indigeneity? That's a problem, and many indigenous scholars have pointed this out. It's not my original sentiment, but this is something we're grappling with.

DF: The third question is about Brazil and Canada partnership projects. Regarding the new liberal neoconservative new fascists times we Brazilians and some other people in the world have faced, how do you think these projects help us understand what is happening in Brazil, in the USA, in Canada and some countries in Europe? Would you have any advice on how to deal with so much for frustration in relation to politics and education?

CS: Yes, it's a great question, and I agree, this struggle transcends borders and it is something we are facing in many corners of the world. I think that we need to keep the conversation very active in terms of the socio-political complexities we find ourselves in as educators, as social activists. I mean, part of the trend we're seeing is that as the political sphere gets ever more - almost crazy - in terms of how it plays out with shocking things happening, we see people retreating from that.

It is almost as if they are overloaded by the headlines that reveal ever more disturbing political decision making, and ever more unethical actions on the part of government, and we retreat from that by saying: “Well, let's just not get political then”, as opposed to really taking a strong stance against it and continuing to problematize it.

I contend that as educators we play a unique role in needing to keep this conversation going; by constantly exploring the political implications of the work we do; not retreating to a place of denial or comfort by claiming to be apolitical in what we do, but inviting our teacher candidates, pre-service teachers and graduate students to take robust and clear stances against the very oppressive forces that are so prevalent in the world today.

DF: Thank you. I think the questions are quite connected, yes? They sometimes overlap. My next question is about this neoliberal education that seems to be everywhere. Some Applied Linguistics and Education scholars have argued in favour of the idea that language as a social practice cannot be disconnected from issues of social class. And this is a very important discussion in Brazil for the alarming social inequality levels. Unfortunately, we are a well-known country in relation to this. David Block (2013) argues that “As hooks writes class matters and those who wish to comment on an act against inequality in contemporary societies would do well to embrace this reality”. Chun and Morgan (2019) affirm that “while there have been the ongoing critical examinations of race, culture and identity in critical ELT, one previously unaddressed issue that has come to the forefront is the economy, especially the ongoing neoliberal phase of capitalism”. Thus, regarding language education and teacher education, do you think topics such as neoliberalism and neoliberal education should be included in our curricula, in our teacher education courses? Moreover, how does one swim against the tide – this neoliberal education - when the whole ocean - capitalism and modernity - is against them?

CS: Very well put! I mean, I wholeheartedly agree with this analysis that class issues are an under-represented issue in education generally, and in English language teaching and teacher education specifically, though I would argue that there are other unaddressed inequalities that also need to be taken up more robustly in the field of TESOL. One would be the intersection of TESOL and

sexual and gender minorities. Maybe in another conversation we could chat about this, but I'm currently doing a national study with a colleague of mine at the University of Manitoba, and we are looking at LGBTQ educators who teach internationally. Many of whom are teaching in EFL contexts though they are not necessarily EFL educators. Some of them are working in international curriculum schools, but we are looking at how they negotiate their professional and personal work lives where they are teaching in contexts where for example being gay might be outlawed, or where homophobia might be socially sanctioned, and there are dangers not only to their working lives but to their lives, period! So, this is something that I'm looking into.

Coming back to the question around neoliberalism I wholeheartedly agree that we need to take a stronger stance and incorporate critiques of neoliberalism into teacher education and into graduate education programs. And how do we go about doing this? Well, I don't have an answer that will apply to everyone; I can simply offer some examples from my own teacher education practices. I think we need to be deliberately and critically examine some of the taken for granted capitalist interventions in our educational system that are so pervasive and so ingrained in the way education systems operate that we failed to even see them, let alone act against them.

As one example, I would point out the education publishing companies – Scholastic, for example – which has a global monopoly on education publishing. It is certainly very pervasive in Canada where they sell books to children and schools are implicated in peddling these books to children because they get resources from schools if they meet certain quotas and sales targets. The books are of low quality, literally they fall apart because the publishing is of such low quality and they are glued together in a very superficial way. And they have themes like Disney promoting very problematic capitalist, sexist, and every -ism you can think of is often represented implicitly in some of these texts.

When I happened to be doing some work in Northern India where I was a guest of the Tibetan government looking at some of the schools for Tibetan children, I remember going into one school that was seen as a very successful example of Tibetan education, and walking into the school library, the entire library had been donated by Scholastic; there was not one book that did not come

from Scholastic, and as you can imagine Scholastic does not write for a Tibetan audience. Nothing was culturally appropriate, linguistically connected to these children's lives. It was all about blond princesses and that sort of thing. That's was horrifying. And then I went to the language lab where again a state-of-the-art facility with students having each individual booth where they could watch and listen to improve their English, but again the entire material collection was Disney's movies. So, very problematic capitalist interventions are happening without being properly critiqued, and I think that's very harmful.

The other way in which I try to problematize some of this in my own work as an education professor is taking for example a critical view on Canada's immigration system. I teach courses on how to support English language learners across the curriculum of elementary and secondary school as part of my work. I take a deliberately critical stance with the teacher candidates around Canada's immigration, by challenging the discourse that Canada welcomes so many newcomers because we are so open and tolerant and in favour of multiculturalism.

The harsh reality of it is: our entire economic strategy depends on immigration; otherwise we would have a declining birth rate and our economy would be an extremely precarious situation if we did not have at least a quarter of a million immigrants coming to Canada annually. That's the reality of it! Thus, problematizing that with my students and unpacking that a little bit is essential because we need to look at the neoliberal orientation. I find the work of Karl Polanyi (1944) very compelling. He was from Hungary, a political economist, an economic historian, and what was remarkable was he published his seminal work called "The Great transformation" in 1944, but it foreshadowed the neoliberal era we currently find ourselves in and all the perils associated with it (and of course this is even before the term neoliberalism was even a term). It's worthwhile looking into some of his work, but I wanted to share with you a quote from him because I just love this. A book was published in 2014 by his daughter who has been a professor at McGill University. He died some time before, and this was a posthumous collection of some of his previously unpublished papers:

An industrial society has one thing in abundance, and that is material welfare more than is good for it. If to uphold justice and the freedom to restore meaning

and unity in life we should ever be called upon to sacrifice some efficiency in production, economy in consumption, or rationality of administration, an industrial civilization can afford it. The economic historians' message to philosophers today should be: we can afford to be both just and free (POLANYI, 2014, p. 1).

This sends shivers down my spine as I contemplate it because I think he's absolutely right! That this for-profit society that has come to dominate all aspects of our lives: At what cost are we embracing that? At what cost should the children in our schools... at what cost the people who can't afford to have a meaningful quality of life within these various contexts? I really think it's a powerful message that needs to be brought to the table in teacher education discussions and programmes.

DF: Thank you for that. It's pretty much the same in Brazil, and one of the things that I could comment on your brilliant answer is that many of us teacher educators talk about critique, we talk about being critical citizens, active citizens, active citizenship, but we forget that the basic structure of society is neoliberal. There is disenfranchisement and we should also target that.

About language education in Brazil, we have developed a National Project entitled *Projeto Nacional de Letramentos* (USP, 2009-2020). In this group, most of us academics, professors and teacher educators have focused on the "breaking" of barriers between university and elementary public schools. In general terms, public education is quite complex in Brazil; for example students who can attend public universities are usually the privileged ones who could afford a private university. By the same token, those who should go to public universities because they cannot afford paying university fees, end up in private universities. Even though this changed for better with the leftist years of governance, the situation is still very complex. There is also this idea that needs to be rethought which is the dichotomy "us" versus "them" (DUBOC; FERRAZ, 2018) in which "us" – teacher educators from public universities - means superiority, knowledge and prestige whereas "them" - public school teachers – means ignorance and inferiority. Any comments on this challenge? Do you face the same contradiction in Canada?

CS: Yes, it is such a salient debate and complex issue. It reminded me of the work of Portuguese scholar Sousa Santos (2007, 2018) who talks about

cognitive justice as a key issue, and I would say that that's a concept that very much informs this debate: Which epistemologies are privileged? Which knowledge is privileged? And how are we undermining the knowledges of practitioners when we position them in this inferior way? Do I think that this happens in Canada? Absolutely. I think the context is somewhat different. I mean, when I hear Brazilian colleagues talk about the challenges of doing research in public schools, I'm aware that public school teachers in Brazil have unique challenges where the school day starts at 7:30 in the morning and goes until 10:30 at night; and though the students will choose one of three time slots to attend, the teachers – to make a living - need to teach all of the three time slots. So, if you're teaching from 7:30 in the morning to 10:30 p.m., where is your time for professional development? Where is your time for preparation? Where is your time to simply have a meal?

DF: All that with very low salaries...

CS: (...) with very low salaries. Absolutely, the salaries aren't there, the benefits aren't there, it's a very precarious professional existence, and that is quite different from the Canadian context where it can be difficult to enter the teaching profession in certain jurisdictions where there has historically been over supply of teachers (although the supply and demand have waxed and waned over the years). Recently, in Ontario's history for example, within a decade ago, there were 30,000 unemployed teachers in Ontario, and so getting into the profession was particularly difficult, especially if you were internationally educated teacher trying to get access to the system. But once you're in the system you enjoy it; you certainly have complex personal challenges to contend with; with diverse classrooms and challenges in terms of policies which are disadvantages to teachers, but at least you have study work, you're in one place, you earn a decent living, and you have the same benefits. That's a very different situation that Brazilian teachers are facing, and that also has an impact on whether public school teachers even want to engage with university-based researchers to try to explore some of the issues facing educators in facing the school systems at large.

In Canada we do have challenges. There certainly is this theory-practice divide where sometimes there is this sense that researchers are part of the Ivory

Tower; that they are disconnected from the realities of schools, and we see this plays out in school boards where they often have their ethics review procedures. So, it's not just enough to get ethical clearance for your project from the University, you are going to have to approach the school board if you want to do research in public schools, and this is where school boards can be gatekeepers and can say: "Well, we don't think your research mandate aligns very well with what we are prioritizing in our school division", they won't give you access to the schools. Ethical requirements also dictate that you get informed consents from everybody else along the way. So even if the school division lets you in, if the teachers aren't willing to participate, they don't have to, they can demonstrate resistance in various ways.

I would suggest that this theory-practice divide plays out in other ways too, not just with research. We have quite a robust for literature in the area of Canadian teacher education, and we know that almost across the board most pre-service teachers absolutely and unequivocally see the practicum as the most important part of the teacher education program. They see the classes they do in the university as potentially less relevant and out of touch. They just want the "hows": "how do I operationalize this?". They see the practicum as essential, and I think we have ways to go before we are better integrating the theory and the practice, and helping teachers understand the relevance of theory for their profession decision making. It's not all about the purely practical strategies that helped to teach a particular aspect.

DF: Thank you, this is our last question, unfortunately. It has been a pleasure to talk to you. In Brazil, many undergraduate courses of modern languages and teacher education, for example, Spanish, French, Italian, German, French – to mention a few - are being excluded from the agenda. What I mean is that not only Brazilians in general find the teaching career unattractive and do not want to be a teacher anymore, but also governmental decisions have collaborated with the closing down of some courses. For example, one of our last official language educational policies (BNCC) determined that English should be the one and only language of elementary education, and that's excluding all the other languages. This is a very serious situation for most of our colleagues of Spanish, French, German, Italian and indigenous languages professors. Teacher

education courses all over the country will probably lose their jobs and the teaching of such languages will not exist. Is this situation similar in Canada? As an educator could you tell us a little bit about your perspectives on the future of the teaching career and teacher education in general?

CS: Thank you very much. Yes, I can appreciate the challenge to Modern languages and teacher development in this area. I would suggest that – again being aware of the quite unique the context of Brazil - we do share the characteristic that language education has a precarious political status here as well. It depends on the language of course. I'll just give you an example: Toronto receives over half of the more than 250,000 newcomers who settle in Canada annually. So, Toronto alone gets more than half. Yet, in Ontario where this is arguably one of the most diverse populations in the world; in this province, bilingual education is outlawed. In other words, you cannot be educated in anything other than in English or French medium as to the official languages.

I would say that programming to support indigenous languages is a little bit of a different story because again this aligns with political goals around reconciliation, but that's not to say that there's a plethora of indigenous languages programs; just that I think that they have more political support. However, conservative political forces that we've seen over the years mean that English as a second or additional language services are viewed almost exclusively from the neoliberal standpoint. In other words: "Get people in here to help support the Canadian economy". If they have higher levels of English or French, but mostly English, they get more points to come. It's an advantage to them in the immigration process.

The government has set a barrier to citizenship where the students need to be at least a high beginner level in English in order to pass the citizenship test. This is a relatively recent development, but it shows how people are being excluded from potentially getting Canadian citizenship if their language skills are lower, and who is most likely to suffer from this policy? Well, it would be the new mother who has little ones to take care of at home; is busy settling her family and doesn't really have a chance to attend regular Intensive English classes. And perhaps because of social expectations around gender contributions, maybe didn't have an opportunity to do very much studying in her home country before

coming. So, she's not only facing the challenge of learning English, but maybe her first language literacy skills are not particularly well developed. We see how again the already most marginalized groups in society are essentially being penalized and disadvantaged by some of the policies around language education, where we've seen many more resources being given to beginner level language classes, but comparatively fewer resources and in fact active cutbacks in the area of higher level English classes.

So, that professional who just needs a little bit more education in English to perhaps resume his career as an engineer can't find access to those classes because the focus is all on beginner level, so that newcomers can get out into the workforce assuming low-paid jobs and start paying taxes as soon as possible. But the sense of well-being and helping newcomers to fill their own professional and personal goals and trajectories is not supported. Thus, we do see language education overall in a precarious situation, and I've given examples from English as a second language, but we also see a decline in the interest in many other language studies as well, though that has some exceptions. At the University of Manitoba for example Ukrainian studies have been declining in interest and this has historically been a significant area, but now we see Asian studies and Asian languages - particularly Chinese - coming to the fore of popularity and there is an explosion in interest in studying Asian languages. Again, presumably because of economic benefits that... people recognize China as a major economic powerhouse and one potentially to be able to do business in that part of the world, and pursue professional opportunities that will be enhanced by learning Mandarin, for example. So, it's not like the decline is the same across the board for every language. We see particular languages in jeopardy when they're not seen as being sort of economically viable, which again links to the problem of a new liberal agenda.

DF: Okay, professor, thank you so much. It's been a pleasure. We have a lot of work to do!

CS: Thank you, Daniel.

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Recebido em: 09-01-2020

Aprovado em: 25-03-2020