

Emerging issues on the education of SLPs around the globe: different models:Brazil

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In Brazil and in all South America SLPs and Audiologists are “fonoaudiólogos”, that is, the same professional has graduation degree in both areas.

There are important differences in the realities of this profession in the various countries of South America. For example, while in Brazil there are 28.000 fonoaudiólogos, in Chile they are just 1.400. It means that there is approximately one fonoaudiólogo for every 10.4 thousand persons in Chile and one fonoaudiólogo for every 6.4 thousand persons in Brazil.

The countries in which Fonoaudiologia exists for more time in South America are Argentina, Brazil and Chile. There are other countries in which this area is developed by psychologists, special educators or language teachers, as in Peru.

In Brazil the first official undergraduate programs started around 1958 in services for deaf children in major hospitals, although there are reports of rehabilitation programs for deaf children since the XIX century. Until the end of the 1970 decade there were only three undergraduate programs, all of them in the city of Sao Paulo. During the decade of 1980 there was a large increase in the number of programs that eventually reached other regions of the country. Still, even nowadays the major part of graduation and post-graduation courses are located in the south and southeast regions of Brazil.

But the reality change is indisputable: in the second half of the 1970 decade, 70 new students were admitted into undergraduate programs in Fonoaudiologia in the whole country; and during the 1990 decade there were more than one hundred programs, some of them with more than one hundred students per year.

On the other hand, the number of professionals with masters and doctorate degrees also increased significantly. Many of these professionals obtained their pos-graduation degrees in different areas - such as psychology, linguistics and education – or abroad.

Only in the last decade the number of field-specific master and doctorate programs improved, but they are still concentrated in the south and southeast regions. Nowadays there are two programs in the south region (one master program in Rio Grande do Sul and one program with master and doctorate degrees in Parana) and six in the southeast region (one master program in Rio de Janeiro and three with master degree and two with master and doctorate degrees in Sao Paulo).

Even considering that these regions concentrate the largest population of Brazil and also the majority of the country’s wealth, there is a clear need of post-graduation programs in the central, north and northeast regions.

The research produced in these programs allowed the consolidation of five scientific journals that are now indexed in international data basis.

The increase in the number of professionals was not accompanied by an increase in public health policies that allowed access of the population to the speech, language and audiology services. Therefore, the lack of jobs for many professionals resulted in the decrease in the number of students interested in the area. With that, many undergraduate programs were suspended or are functioning with lesser students than planned.

This poses one of the major challenges in education of SLPs and audiologists in Brazil in this beginning of the third millennium.

While keeping-up with a quality based teaching approach, there is the need to provide access of the general population to speech-language and audiology services, and in some regions of our country this is also a role of the university. The basic needs of a large portion of the population, such as housing and feeding, are just now being attended. Access to information and education in some regions is so precarious that many universities have out-of-campus programs designed to meet these issues. Unfortunately just a few of these programs include SLPs or audiologists.

It is undoubtedly a challenge to provide to a student, for example, from Sao Paulo, one of the major cities of the world, instruments, parameters and criteria through which observe a child that lives healthy and happily, for example, in the Amazon margin. The question proposed is: should this child be expected to meet criteria developed to evaluate children with access to TVs, computers and mobile-phones or, if choosing to apply more loosely any criteria wouldn't jeopardize the possibility of this child to compete with others on a highly competitive society? Obviously one cannot (or should not) expect that this kind of question be answered by a undergraduate student. But it must be part of a health and education policy discussed and enforced by the university, based on the development of knowledge which is applicable to specific situations such as the example mentioned.

Another important challenge involved in the education of SLPs and audiologists in Brazil is the continued education policy. The main professional council (Conselho Federal de Fonoaudiologia - CFFa) officially recognizes five areas of specialization: voice, audiology, language, oral myology and public health. Until 2006 the sole demand for a specialist title was to attend to a specialization course with at least 500 hours of duration that was recognized by the CFFa. The criteria for obtaining the specialist title changed in 2007. The current criteria include scores involving courses, scientific activities and a written test. The greatest change however is the fact that from now on the title will have to be renewed every three years through a determined amount of points obtained in scientific and actualization activities and courses. This implies a change of habit demanding that the professional effectively keeps him/herself updated and therefore constantly improving the professional practice. It is still not part of SLPs' and audiologists' general habits to continue involved with learning and teaching activities after graduation. While enrolling in professional councils is mandatory, the association to scientific societies is optional. There are two scientific societies of the area in Brazil: the Sociedade Brasileira de Fonoaudiologia – SBFa (Brazilian Society of Speech and Language Pathology and Audiology) and the Academia Brasileira de Audiologia – ABA (Brazilian Academy of Audiology). Although there are approximately 28.000 fonoaudiólogos in Brazil, less than 2000 are members of the SBFa and less than 1000 are members of ABA.

Stimulating SLPs and audiologists to join scientific societies, renew specialization titles, subscribe scientific journals will contribute to the improvement of the quality of the general practice.

Another challenge that can be identified is the need to bridge the wide gaps between different realities.

The general fonoaudiologo - working in a small town outside the south-southeast axle, for example - may be the professional that 15 years ago went through an undergraduate program with almost five thousand hours of theoretical and practical teaching, eventually enrolled in a specialization course and from then on read just a few books or attended some conferences or short courses. Normally this professional will receive patients with all kinds of disorders and eventually will have a part-time job doing audiometric evaluations.

Or the general fonoaudiologo may be the professional that works in a small town near Sao Paulo or Curitiba after graduation, for example. He/she may have competed successfully with other health professionals for a scholarship for the master and doctorate programs and publishes his/her research in indexed journals. Normally this professional will receive patients within his/her specific field and keeps actualized by reading international papers through international data basis.

Both professionals do the best work they can. But they face completely different needs and challenges. The sole fonoaudiologo of a relatively isolated city or town needn't and shouldn't be a specialist, because he/she must be able to provide different kinds of services to different needs. But he/she must have access to information and knowledge in order to guarantee the quality of his/her practice.

On the other hand, the SLP or audiologist working on a competitive environment must be a specialist in order to continue his/her actualization on the knowledge produced worldwide. The

actualization and research production are essential to enable the SLP or audiologist to dispute sponsorships e research funding with other areas of the health sciences on equal basis.

There are many emerging issues about the education of speech and language pathologists and audiologists on an emerging country such as Brazil. Many of the problems that interfere with professional practice and education are the problems faced by the whole country.

Diversity is one of the major characteristics of Brazil and it has been described since the first Europeans came to our country. It comprises all aspects of our physical and social environment and it leads to great troubles but also to great opportunities and experiences. The same is true to Fonoaudiologia: there are troubles and the need for many adjustments but there are also many opportunities of development related to a professional there is still so young in our country.