

## PRIMARY PUBLIC EDUCATION IN THE NORTHWEST OF MINAS GERAIS IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY: the conditions of the schools in the backlands

Instrução pública primária para negros e pobres no noroeste de Minas Gerais  
no início do século XX: as condições das escolas dos sertões

Educación pública primaria en el noroeste de Minas Gerais a principios del siglo XX:  
las condiciones de las escuelas en los sertones

NÁDIA BUENO REZENDE

Instituto Federal do Norte de Minas Gerais, Arinos, MG, Brasil. *E-mail: nadia.rezende@ifnmg.edu.br.*

**Abstract:** This article problematizes the spatial distribution and conditions of primary public schools in the northwest of Minas Gerais during the early decades of the Brazilian republic. We use the theoretical and methodological framework proposed by Veiga (2022), which addresses the socio-racial division of education through unequal school provision. We observed that the public authorities privileged the School Group, located in the urban area, described in the documentary sources as an isolated and exceptionally civilized point. On the other hand, evidenced by the closure of schools, the lack of furniture and teaching materials, the absence of teachers, and the rarity of visits from educational authorities, we observed the neglect of public education for poor and black children living in the vast region then characterized as a wild *sertão*, including from a racial criterion.

**Keywords:** Paracatu; history of education; black people; educational inequality.

**Resumo:** O artigo problematiza a distribuição territorial e as condições das escolas públicas primárias do noroeste de Minas Gerais, nas décadas iniciais da República brasileira. Utilizamos o recorte teórico metodológico proposto por Veiga (2022), que aborda a divisão sociorracial da educação por meio da oferta escolar desigual. Verificamos, por parte do poder público, o privilégio concedido ao Grupo Escolar, localizado na porção urbana, apontada nas fontes documentais como um ponto isolado e excepcionalmente civilizado. Por outro lado, evidenciado pelo fechamento de escolas, não envio de mobiliário e material didático, falta de professores e raridade de visitas de autoridades pedagógicas, verificamos o descuido com a instrução pública das crianças pobres e negras moradoras da vasta região então caracterizada como um sertão selvagem, caracterização construída, inclusive, a partir de um critério racial.

**Palavras-chave:** Paracatu; história da educação; negros; desigualdade educacional.

**Resumen:** El artículo problematiza la distribución territorial y las condiciones de las escuelas públicas primarias del noroeste de Minas Gerais durante las primeras décadas de la república brasileña. Utilizamos el marco teórico y metodológico propuesto por Veiga (2022), que aborda la división sociorracial de la educación a través de la oferta escolar desigual. Observamos que las autoridades públicas privilegiaron el Grupo Escolar, ubicado en la zona urbana, descrito en las fuentes documentales como un punto aislado y excepcionalmente civilizado. Por otro lado, evidenciado por el cierre de escuelas, la falta de mobiliario y materiales didácticos, la ausencia de maestros y la rareza de visitas de autoridades educativas, observamos el descuido de la educación pública para los niños pobres y negros que viven en la vasta región entonces caracterizada como un sertão salvaje, incluso a partir de un criterio racial.

**Palabras clave:** Paracatu; historia de la educación; negro; desigualdad educativa.

## INTRODUCTION

With a time frame in the first decades of the Brazilian republic, the objective of this article is to problematize the territorial distribution and operating conditions of public primary schools in the northwest of the state of Minas Gerais, a vast region largely inhabited by a poor black population and recognized as a great *sertão* (backlands), at a time when schools were reaffirmed as institutions that propagated civilization. We start from the already known fact (Souza, 1998; Carvalho, 1989) that, although schools were postulated as one of the pillars of the Republic, the educational policy established with the new regime had a limited scope, thus maintaining the precarious situation of a large part of the national territory. Assuming that the northwest of Minas Gerais was a predominantly rural region and was significantly on the fringes of the growing civilization, we investigated school coverage in this location, seeking to problematize the lack of prestige, scarcity, absences, and abandonment.

In the field of the history of education, some authors (Souza, 1998; Veiga, 2002; Boto, 2017) have already clarified that schools and public education were a fundamental part of a broad civilizing project<sup>1</sup>, from Europe to the entire West. In Brazil, primary schools, as a fundamental institution for a civilizing project of the nation, were given specific contours during the first decades of the Republic.

In a study on schools and the Republic in Brazil in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Carvalho (1989) highlighted the contrast between the fact that schools were only available to a few people at that time, although in the republican imagination they were an emblem of the establishment of a new order, an institution where knowledge and citizenship would intertwine, bringing progress. The mythification of the power of education was so great that, according to Souza (1998), the republicans placed in primary schools not only their hopes for the consolidation of the new regime, but also for the regeneration of the nation. At the heart of the project to expand access to schools was the need for popular education associated with order, control and social reforms, demands then considered to be the foundations of the civilization they intended to build.

Therefore, despite the recognition of the political and social need for popular education, we know that restricted access to school was related to the republican option for investing in School Groups, mostly located in urban centers, to the detriment of the isolated school model, with greater penetration in rural areas, as Souza (1998) points out. Both Carvalho (1989) and Souza (1998) emphasize that the creation of a School Group, with its necessarily majestic, well-lit and spacious

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<sup>1</sup> When we mention the civilizing project, we are referring to the studies of Norbert Elias (1994), a sociologist who studied the types of behavior considered typical of Western civilized man. See Veiga (2002) to learn about the implications of Norbert Elias' analyses for studies in the field of the history of education.

buildings, its furniture, teaching materials and graded classes in accordance with the precepts of modern pedagogy, all displayed on constant display, evidenced much more the supposed progress that the Republic established than the creation of an isolated school, which more closely resembled the precariousness and disorganization of the empire's public schools. This option, however, proved to be irreconcilable with a policy of mass schooling, which implied a double undertaking, carried out by countries that managed to establish their national education systems in the 19th century: the establishment of unitary schools in small towns and rural areas, and, in urban centers, the creation of graduated schools (Souza, 1998).

The option for School Groups, favoring the urban environment, spread from São Paulo to other states in Brazil, since the beginning of the Republic (Souza, 1998). The consequences of this option, according to Souza (1998), evidence the marginalization of the rural population, the majority in the country. Still according to the author, until 1919, in SP, isolated schools continued to be created in rural and suburban areas, revealing some recognition of the demand and importance of education in these areas. However, the difficulties in providing these schools were enormous, in addition to their teachers facing problems such as how to manage the place, lower salaries and unsuitability for life in the countryside.

Another consequence of the privilege granted to the School Groups was the restriction of access to public education for poor black children. These children, living in rural and even suburban areas, often got involved in work, which was necessary for their subsistence, or were left out of the School Groups due to the social representation of that space itself. The requirement of cleanliness, uniforms, and materials was a scenario that repelled them, according to the reflections of Souza (2008). The author emphasizes that there was a reduced presence of black children in primary schools, since the educational policies of the period were clearly directed at groups of European immigrants, involved in the problems of constructing national identity. It is also worth noting that the period was marked by the concern of doctors, scientists and intellectuals with the racial issue in the country, by the circulation of eugenic theories and by the most diverse points of view on the consequences of the miscegenation characteristic of the Brazilian population, with effects on the perceptions about the educability of the black and poor population (Schwarcz, 2020). These were factors that impacted the construction of School Groups as a priority public educational policy and that, at the same time, contributed to the limited contemplation of black children.

In Minas Gerais, following the example of São Paulo, the João Pinheiro Reform introduced School Groups in 1906. Gradually, this led to a shift in educational policies. The graded organization, grouping several teachers in a single school with a larger number of students, became prioritized. This approach aimed to standardize education, focusing on forming republican citizens and enabling the government to supervise teaching work through school inspections. As a result, these policies began to take

precedence over other models, such as gender-specific or mixed schools, rural and district schools, and small multi-grade schools with a single teacher. These isolated schools, scattered across villages, were increasingly sidelined (Carvalho, 2019). This transition was portrayed by Faria Filho (2000) as the change from the school of the slums to the palaces, a symbolic image of the republican message of breaking with a precarious and filthy imperial past, towards a hygienic and splendid future.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to highlight, however, that the School Groups were especially urban, and were part of the physiognomy of the civilized environment, along with gardens, mansions, shops, train stations, sewage systems, lighting, street paving, factories, hospitals, among others (Souza, 1998). It is also important to point out that they were educational institutions with little space for the poor and black population, as already discussed. Since the School Group was, at that time, the main public policy for primary education in Minas Gerais, how was the situation of schooling for children in the northwest of the state, an area of vast rural extension, with settlements far apart from each other, significantly inhabited by the black and poor population?

We articulate our analysis based on the theoretical methodological framework proposed by Veiga (2022). The author seeks to highlight a socio-racial division in education throughout the 19th century and early 20th century, as a result of the institutionalization of unequal school education, through a distinguished arrangement throughout Latin America. Veiga (2022) analyzes the policies of inequalities in the dissemination of elementary education in Latin American countries, manifested in different aspects of the constitution of their national education systems, always crossed, as the author highlights, by the problem of the education of certain subjects considered “ignorant”, “savage” and “uncultured”. Among several Brazilian intellectuals of the 19th and early 20th centuries, according to Veiga (2022), there was persistent doubt about the conditions under which the inhabitants of Brazil could become civilized, and education policies, including republican ones, were impacted by this questioning. For the author,

The central issue is that the regulation of primary school or elementary education for all children gave visibility to disparate social conditions and places in which children experience childhood: white, black, mixed-race, indigenous, poor, wealthy, and enslaved children. It was this diversity of clientele that organized the unequal provision: urban schools, rural primary schools (always offered with reduced school time and content), and special or welfare educational institutions. Inequality can be identified in the structuring of different levels and curricula, the justifications for which could be the location of the school, the number of inhabitants in the region, the care provided to “delinquent” or abandoned children, or even meritocratic appeals

and abstract notions of talent and aptitude, in addition to the poverty of families (Veiga, 2022, p. 277, author's emphasis).

Using the theoretical methodological framework proposed by the author, we investigated how the composition of an unequal school supply occurred in the northwest of Minas Gerais. To carry out this study, we used as documentary sources<sup>2</sup> laws and decrees of public education in the state of Minas Gerais, minutes of school examinations and inspections, the Minas Gerais Yearbook of 1913, an official periodical of the state, called *Jornal Minas Geraes* and, mainly, the memorialistic book by professor Olympio Gonzaga, called *Memória histórica de Paracatu*, published in 1910<sup>3</sup>.

We divided the article into three parts. In the first, we bring up aspects of the territorial extension, the rural predominance and the reading that was made about its inhabitants. Thereupon, we seek to understand the northwest of Minas Gerais as a region considered somewhat on the fringes of civilization at the beginning of the 20th century. In the second part, we point out the number and location of public primary schools in the region and, in the third and last part, we seek to identify the operating conditions of these schools, considering aspects of each location. In this way, we were able to investigate the school supply and certain circumstances of the operation of public primary schools in the northwest of Minas Gerais, a region supposedly immersed in incivility, in a time marked by the affirmation of the school as a disseminator of civilization and a pillar of the republic.

## THE NORTHWEST OF MINAS GERAIS IN THE EARLY DECADES OF THE REPUBLIC: A *SERTÃO* ON THE MARGIN OF CIVILIZATION

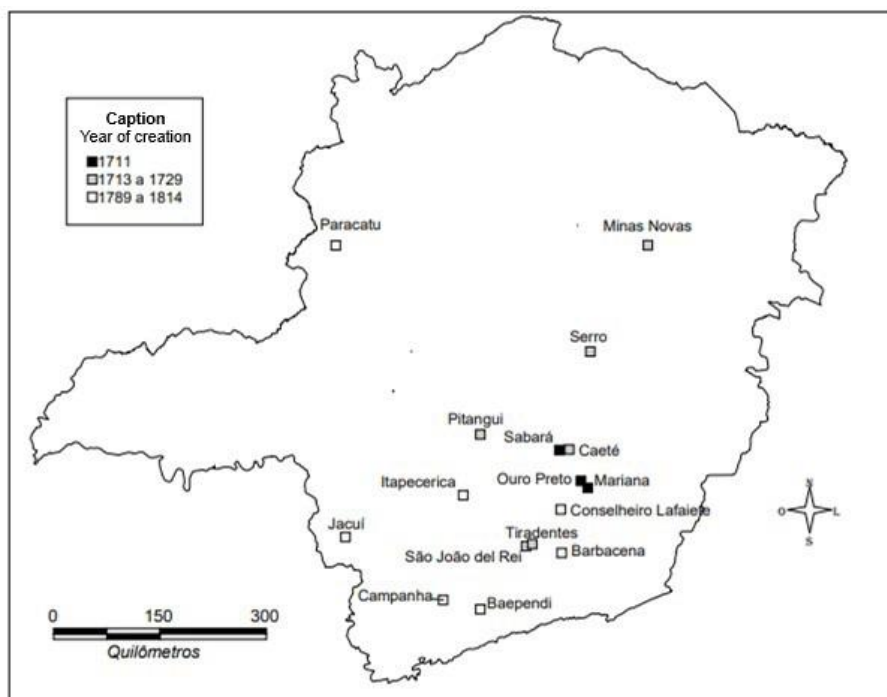
The municipality that historically occupied most of the territory in the northwest of Minas Gerais is Paracatu, which emerged as a small village in the late 17th century. This village through a period of gold mining during the 18th century and, in the 19th century, in 1840, changed its status from a village to a city, with its own administration (Gama, 2015). In the imagery produced through the writings of memoirists and cartographic representations, Paracatu was gradually associated with a region where an isolated settlement nucleus represented the true seed of an isolated civilization in the midst of an immense territory dominated by wild natives and untamed nature (Gama, 2015). This characterization is supported, for example, by the

<sup>2</sup> The archives used in the research were the following: the Brazilian Digital Newspaper Library of the National Library, the Digital Library of the Minas Gerais Assembly and the Olímpio M. Gonzaga Municipal Public Archive, in Paracatu/MG.

<sup>3</sup> This book was written by Olympio Gonzaga motivated by the concern of constructing the first record of the history of Paracatu and, as a memorialistic work, it bears the marks of the period's history conception and the author's social place of speech (Gama, 2015, p. 46).

map that indicates the first villages created in the captaincy of Minas Gerais (Figure 1), in which we can see the isolation of Paracatu, the only village in the entire northwest.

**Figure 1** - Map of the captaincy of Minas Gerais – first towns created (1711-1814)



Source: Rodarte, Paula and Simões (2004, p. 12).

Despite a similar understanding of many other places in the country, according to Gama (2015), the region to the northwest of Minas Gerais was commonly portrayed as a “sertão” in cartographic documents, publications by memoirists and chroniclers, at least since the beginning of the 18th century. For the author, this *sertão* was considered a place far from the centers of power and order, a place of emptiness, savagery, inhospitableness, uncivilization, and Paracatu was considered a city lost in that immensity. With alternative meanings, this qualifier of “sertão” remained attached to the region at least until the mid-20th century, when Guimarães Rosa (2019) wrote the classic literary work *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (in English, *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*), referring to that portion of the state’s territory.

Thanks to various studies (Lima, 2013; Galetti, 2012; Neves, 2003; Amado, 1995), we know that the notion of *sertão* holds an abundant condensation of meanings, a composition that is the product of practices specific to a civilizing project. A term historically used to designate a space that is more symbolic than geographic, according to Romeiro and Botelho (2004), the *sertão* was located on the borders of the known world, opposing it and repelling the civilized way of life. Thus, the notion of *sertão*, for Monarcha (2009), functioned as a metaphor for the nation's deviations, widely used to refer to the insufficiency of the Brazilian civilizing process.



The *sertão*, considered to as an obstacle to the country's progress, became the target of expeditions, such as that of Belisário Penna in 1912, a hygienist tasked with taking inventory of the population's health conditions, who arrived at an alarming diagnosis, according to studies by Carvalho (1989) and Monarcha (2009). The precarious situation diagnosed would be reversed, among other means, by educating the children who lived there, since, as already pointed out, the school, in the republican imagination, was a sign of the establishment of the new order, an arena for achieving progress (Carvalho, 1989), a means of teaching about hygiene, civic spirit, love of country, work, citizen responsibilities, among other values considered fundamental for the country's development (Gonçalves Neto, 2013).

In the early decades of the Republic, the period of interest for our investigations, the northwest of Minas Gerais was commonly considered among those regions called *sertão*. For example, in the news item reproduced in the *Anuário de Minas*, in 1913, from the newspaper *O Araguaia*, on September 23, 1907, it could be read:

Dominating the vast municipality [Paracatu], which is made up of eleven administrative districts, is the old city of Paracatu, - a true "oasis of civilization" in those distant parts of our State. It truly amazes those who travel through the "*sertão* of Minas Gerais" to find in such a remote spot, like the Palmyra of the desert, a city in the conditions of Paracatu, lost in the vastness of an area devoid of all the benefits of progress and any improvement of modern industry; and, relived in that atmosphere of civilization, comforted by the company of an intelligent, cultured, kind and hospitable society, the traveler, amazed at the prospect of a picture so different from life in the *sertão*, does not know how to explain this social phenomenon, when it seems to all of us, from afar, that no reflection of intelligent work and modern life can penetrate there [...] (Pessoa, 1913, pp. 591-592, emphasis added).

Except for the city of Paracatu, the most urban area belonging to the municipality of Paracatu, we can see that the entire area in the northwest of the state, nicknamed as the *sertão* of Minas Gerais, considered as an inhospitable place, difficult to penetrate by the civilizing canons of the time, among which was the primary public education. Although it had remarkable natural beauty, that *sertão* of Minas Gerais was understood based on what it lacked: there was no progress, no industries. However, there was a supposed island of civilization there, surprisingly built, sheltering an "intelligent", "cultured", "friendly", in short, civilized population, a characteristic that would be exceptional, when it comes to the inhabitants of the *sertão*.

Nonetheless, apart from the inhabitants of the restricted civilized island, who inhabited the *sertão* located in the northwest of Minas Gerais? In the understanding of scientists, travelers and social thinkers of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the

inhabitants of the *sertões* of Brazil were “caboclos”, “mamelucos”, “botocudos”, indigenous people, blacks, gunmen, mestizos, among other denominations (Lima, 2013).

An analysis published in the Minas Gerais Yearbook in 1906 provides interesting information about who inhabited the different regions of the state.

The constituent elements of our population [of Minas Gerais] are thus arranged: white nationals [...], white Europeans [...], yellow Americans and Asians [...], blacks of African or national origin, held in captivity until May 13, 1888; and, finally, the large mass of mixed-race people who came out of this long and secular ethnic crossing of whites with blacks, of blacks with savages, of Indians with Europeans, a melting pot of races that produced mulattos, caboclos, pardos, cafusos, creoles, fulas, etc. Fortunately, there are areas in Minas where the pure element, the white, was almost or completely predominant, in the south and north; while in the vast area of the agricultural region of Mata and the center, where gold and diamond mining prospered, there the fusion of the three elements (Luso-Paulista, African and aboriginal) was more perfect, more closed. “More than ten thousand savages” still roam the virgin forests of the east and northeast of Minas, “as well as in the extreme west of the State (bordering Bahia”, Espírito Santo, “Goyaz” and Matto Grosso): these main tribes are of Botocudo bugres [...] (A População de..., 1906, p. 149-150, our emphasis).

It has been stated that, among other places, in the far west and on the borders with Goiás and Bahia, that is, in the northwest of the state, there lived many blacks, mixed-race people, Botocudos, in short, savages, thus classified according to racial criteria. At the time, several thinkers understood the race factor as essential to understanding the origin of human inequalities and, in this context, whites would be the model of superiority, while the other races were naturally inferior, therefore, savages, among other derogatory qualifiers (Veiga, 2022; Schwarcz, 2020). It is important to emphasize, therefore, that the portrayal of the city of Paracatu as a seed of civilization in a remote point of the *sertão* of Minas Gerais translates an idea of tension between wildlife and civilized life, and this tension is expressed, among other ways, from a racial reading of society.

From various points of view, the northwest of the state, one of the *sertões* of Minas Gerais, was predominantly home to uncivilized people, whether due to a condition of its own nature, analyzed from a racial perspective, or because of the lack of opportunities to attend schools. Thus, the insufficiency of the civilizing process in the region was related, among other factors, not only to the simple lack of primary education for the population, but also to the specific challenges of educating a supposedly inferior humanity, the mixed-race, the black, the indian, challenges based



on a eugenic perspective of socio-racial division. Therefore, when we discuss the public primary schools that existed in the northwest of Minas Gerais in the first decades of the 20th century, we cannot lose sight of the fact that we will be dealing with the presence and/or absence of black and poor children in public educational institutions in a region considered to be on the fringes of the civilization that was intended to be built and expanded.

## THE NUMBER AND LOCATION OF PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTHWEST OF MINAS GERAIS

To understand the location of the public primary schools, it is first necessary to understand the settlements that formed the municipality of Paracatu, since the schools were located in these concentrations. Olympio Gonzaga (1910) described the vast municipality of Paracatu, measuring 51,227 km<sup>2</sup>, as the second largest municipality in the state, larger than Switzerland and only slightly smaller than Portugal, and divided into several districts, which housed some villages, forming population concentrations far from each other. The isolated area of urban concentration, that “oasis of civilization”, was called the “district of Cidade”, “city of Paracatu” or “headquarters”, and centralized the public administration that controlled all the other districts. The District of Cidade contained the public buildings and the homes of the local elite, in addition to some villages, more or less distant from the urban concentration. Under the jurisdiction of the Cidade District, the other districts belonging to the municipality of Paracatu were spread across the immense territory that covered the entire northwest of Minas Gerais. In Figure 2, we draw this organization.

**Figure 2** - Districts of the municipality of Paracatu/MG and Arraiais of the Cidade District in 1910<sup>4</sup>



Source: Elaborated by the author.

<sup>4</sup> To prepare Figure 1, we used information from Olympio Gonzaga's book (1910), cross-referenced with data captured through Google Maps. Some details about the construction of the map are important: Olympio Gonzaga (1910) indicates the existence of another Arraial in the City District, named "Augustinho", and "inhabited by honorable farmers", without providing information about schools in the location. However, it was not possible to point it out on the map, because we were unable to obtain information about its location. Furthermore, due to their proximity, it was not possible to distinguish the location of the Arraiais Pouso Alegre and Tapera on the map. It is also worth noting that, during the time period covered in this study, the configuration of the municipality of Paracatu changed quite frequently. In fact, throughout the 20th century, Paracatu was gradually dismembered, so that, commonly, the districts became new municipalities. Currently, the region is home to, for example, Unaí, João Pinheiro, Buritis, Arinos, Bonfinópolis, Formoso, among other municipalities located in the territory that once belonged to Paracatu, which is now much smaller in terms of territorial extension.

Through the consulted sources, we found, in short, the existence of a public primary school in each of the districts indicated in Figure 2, except for the districts of Rio Preto and Santana dos Alegres, with two schools each, and the district of Cidade, which had schools in the urban center and in one or another village. It is important to note that we identified variations in this number in documents from the years 1900 to 1913.

For example, in the January 1900 edition of the *Jornal Minas Geraes*, the number of public primary schools in the state's municipalities was listed and, in relation to Paracatu, the following was published:

Municipality of Paracatu (18 seats): Urban - 6, 4 for males and two for females. District - 12, one for each sex in the districts of Rio Preto, Santana dos Alegres, and one mixed in each of the districts of Guarda-mor, Caatinga, Lajes, Morrinhos, Santo Antônio da Água Fria, Formoso, Santo Antônio da Canna Brava and Santana do Burity (*Relação...*, 1900, p. 2).

Ten years later, in 1910, Olympio Gonzaga (1910) found that the municipality had two primary schools located in the district of Cidade, one of them in the village of São Sebastião and the other in the headquarters, where there was also a School Group. He also stated the existence of two schools in the district of Rio Preto, and a mixed school in each of the other districts of Paracatu, namely, Catinga, Formoso, Guarda-Mór, Lages, Morrinhos, Burity, Alegres, S. Antonio da Agua Fria and Canna Brava. Thus, while in 1900 there were eighteen primary schools, in 1910 there were fourteen public primary education institutions throughout the territorial extension of Paracatu.

In the Minas Gerais Yearbook of 1913, the presence of eleven state public schools was announced, as follows: “In addition to the School Group of the city of Paracatu, there are state primary schools in this municipality, in Catinga, Formoso, Guarda-Mór, Lages, Morrinhos, Rio Preto, S. Anna do Burity, S. Anna dos Alegres, S. Antônio da Agua Fria and S. Antônio da Canna Brava” (*XCIX...*, 1913, p. 591).

Pereira (2023), in research on the financing of primary public education in Minas Gerais between 1890 and 1920, found the same number of eleven state primary schools in Paracatu in 1916, in contrast to the numbers of several municipalities located on the outskirts of the capital, which had at least twenty-five. For the author, the distribution of schools throughout the State was linked to political factors, and not to the population demand of each municipality, so that the contrasts reveal an inequality in the school supply, carried out by the public authorities (Pereira, 2023).

In the consulted sources, we were able to determine a variation between eleven and eighteen public primary schools between 1900 and 1913, distributed throughout the districts of Paracatu, most of them having only one school. It is worth noting that,

in the meantime, in 1906, the João Pinheiro Reform took place, which, in art. 4, stated: “[...] the Government will make every possible effort to spread education to all population centers” (Law No. 439..., 1906). Thus, we perceive, in state legislation, the concern with an education that would reach all municipalities, districts and villages/settlements in the state territory. However, what happened, as determined, was a decrease in the number of schools in the settlements of Paracatu.

Studies by Gonçalves Neto (2013) help us understand that decisions about where schools would be installed and the resources allocated for their maintenance came from the state and municipal levels. The author researched the discussions about public education held among the first councilors to take office in the Paracatu City Council in 1892, at the dawn of the Republic, concluding that the topic had significant vitality among the Paracatu elite, with a specific committee being set up to debate popular education, in addition to concerns being expressed about the creation of schools in the municipality and the drafting of a municipal law for public education. Thus, the author emphasized that municipal efforts were added to state efforts in an attempt to promote education in the region, at a time when, even with the Proclamation of the Republic, the decentralization of educational care persisted at the federal level.

Public investments in schools in Paracatu represented an attempt by the government, through the education of children, to reach areas that were considered distant, isolated, and marginalized, commonly referred to as “sertões”, as already discussed. Isolated in the *sertão*, the population of Paracatu was among the least literate in the state, according to Galvão and Frade (2019), ranking among the 45 municipalities in which up to 25% of the population knew how to read, while the other 133 municipalities in the state had a higher percentage of readers. Given these data, we can state that, although recognized as essential, the presence of schools in the districts that made up Paracatu in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was insufficient.

## **OPERATING CONDITIONS OF PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE DISTRICTS OF THE REGION**

Although we found documentary sources with records that there was at least one school in each district of the municipality of Paracatu, we have evidence that they were not fully operational. For example, when detailing the situation of each district, Olympio Gonzaga (1910) recorded that, in several of them, even though there was one, the school chair was vacant, that is, the school did not operate due to a lack of teachers. Examining the reports of Professor Olympio Gonzaga (1910), specific to each district, helps us to verify the situation of the public primary school in each of them.

According to Olympio Gonzaga (1910), there was a school in the city district, which opened in September 1908, with 8 teachers and 2 employees, one being a doorman and one being a helper. The teacher described the school building as one of the best in the city and reported that it had been financed by the City Council together with resources from a popular subscription led by local personalities. The description of the school building was complimentary: “It has large and hygienic rooms, richly furnished, equipped with excellent school supplies, piped drinking water and marble urinals” (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910, p. 73). The teacher also stated that the school was provided with excellent materials by the state government (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910), that it was attended by four hundred students of both sexes, and that the students wore a blue uniform (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910). The resources for the opening and operation of the Paracatu School Group, as announced by Olympio Gonzaga (1910), came from state and municipal treasure, a common situation at that time, when the states ended up transferring part of the responsibilities and costs for the opening and maintenance of primary schools to the municipalities (Gonçalves Neto, 2013), as already pointed out.

Paracatu was therefore affected by the creation of School Groups, the main public policy for primary education in the first decades of the republic. This educational institution located in the most urbanized part of the municipality, the Cidade district, was part of the local architecture, helping to highlight an isolated civilization built in the middle of the *sertão*. A symbol of civilization, the School Group, according to Veiga (2022), was a four-year primary school with a varied clientele, but which, in general, was more regularly attended by white children, with good financial conditions, not subjected to child labor. Thus, these children had time to dedicate themselves to school as well as resources to acquire the necessary clothing and school supplies.

Still in the district of Cidade, and maintained by the City Council, Olympio Gonzaga (1910) indicated the existence of a primary school in the headquarters, without presenting information about its conditions. But in a document called *Termo de visita*, from 1909, we find a report about this school:

The same [municipal school of this city] operates with a good, spacious, bright and well-ventilated room. There were 38 students present out of 69 enrolled. They were generally dressed with a certain decency. Examining some of the subjects taught - reading, native language, arithmetic, geography and history of Brazil - I verified that they have made regular progress. [...] The teacher is dedicated to teaching, but due to the great lack of schoolbooks (since many students are poor), frequent failures and the enrollment that is open throughout the school year, he has not been able to get the desired results from his students (*Termo de visita...*, 1909).

Although also located in the urban center of Paracatu, the contrast between this school and the description of the School Group is evident, as can be seen in the standardization of the blue uniform in one and the relatively decent clothing in the other. According to Veiga (2022, p. 323), the lack of clothing to go to school led to school absenteeism, another factor that kept poor children away from schools. It is also important to highlight that this urban school was apparently maintained with only municipal resources, without state assistance, which confirms the concern of local politicians with the issue of education.

However, if in the urban area of the Cidade district has difficulties with poverty, lack of teaching materials and lack of attendance as already reported, in the surrounding villages, still located in this district headquarters, the situation seems to be getting worse. For example, in the village of São Sebastião, Olympio Gonzaga (1910) reported the existence of a school, although he stated in another passage of his writings that this location was “[...] in decline and without a school for the education of its children” (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910, p. 79). From this school in the village of São Sebastião, we found a document called *Boletim* (or *Bulletin*, in English), from the second quarter of 1908, in which the teacher in charge recorded the following:

This school did not receive any visits from any school authority during this quarter, nor did it purchase any textbooks or school supplies. The number of enrolled students continues to be low, due to the lack of love for education on the part of certain parents in this town, who in no way attempt to educate their children (Escola Rural..., 1908).

The abandonment is evidenced by the lack of pedagogical resources and the absence of visits such as those by school inspectors, a situation that was repeated in other schools in the villages and other districts, apparently.

Just like the São Sebastião settlement, Olympio Gonzaga (1910) presented the settlements of São Domingos and Lagoa as being in decline, and in these locations, the professor did not provide information about the presence of schools. However, one piece of information he presented about the Lagoa settlement is noteworthy: “[...] the largest and most populated (almost exclusively by 'creoles')” (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910, p. 79, emphasis added). It is worth noting that, currently, this location is recognized as a remnant of a quilombo, called the Lagoa Community, as is the other settlement, which today is the Quilombo of São Domingos (Anjos, 2006). Therefore, the absence of primary schools in these settlements means that black children are deprived of access to public education. Notably, Olympio Gonzaga's (1910) descriptions were permeated by socio-racial aspects, precepts that granted white people the role of civilizing element, and black people the role of hindering the nation's progress, in vogue at the time, according to Schwarcz's (2020) investigations.



The village of Pouso Alegre was presented by Olympio Gonzaga (1910, p. 79) with different credentials: “This prosperous village has good houses, a chapel and a private school subsidized by our city council”. Here, again, we observe that the conditions for the functioning of the school are not guaranteed at the state level, but provided by the municipal administration. Regarding the village of Paiol, Olympio Gonzaga (1910) points out that there was once a public school there, while in the village of Tapera, there were two. Specifically about the latter, the teacher reports: “It once had two well-attended schools that were abolished with the education reform, making it difficult for its children to be educated” (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910, p. 79).

The complaint about the suppression of schools in this village due to the education reform indicates dissatisfaction with the decisions taken at the state level and the indication that such measures represented a setback in the expansion of access to public education for children in the area. A plausible hypothesis is that the chairs previously located in these villages were moved to the School Group, with the João Pinheiro reform, in 1906. This hypothesis is strengthened by the process described by Souza (1998), which occurred in the state of São Paulo, where a school group was created by grouping several isolated schools, hence the name “group”.

In the district of Cidade, it is noted that Olympio Gonzaga's report emphasizes deficiencies in public education, mainly in the villages, in contrast with the situation of the School Group, located in the city center, that is, in the urbanized part of Paracatu. The deficiencies in public education are consistent with the broader picture of the populations of many villages near the urban area, a fact that is confirmed, for example, by the following report by Olympio Gonzaga:

On Saturdays, a large number of poor beggars drag themselves through the city streets, from door to door, asking for alms, some bread, with which they can satisfy their hunger. How many, however, suffer from hunger in their homes, because they are embarrassed to go out onto the street! Paracatu is in great need of a charity house (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910, p. 76).

The poverty of a large part of the population contrasted with the existence of a certain urban structure in Paracatu that fostered written culture in the region, as we can see from the studies by Galvão and Frade (2019). Using five indicators – press, library, printing houses, secondary, normal, professional and higher education institutions and theater –, the authors analyzed the distribution of the written word throughout the territory of Minas Gerais and found the presence of four of these five indicators in Paracatu. It is interesting to note that the high number of indicators of written culture contrasts with the tiny percentage of up to 25% of literate people, a number also raised by the authors, indicating a clear social inequality in the municipality. Incidentally, it seems to us that the republican policy of installing School Groups in urban

concentrations, to the detriment of investments in isolated schools, fueled and deepened this scenario of inequality in the northwest of Minas Gerais.

As already discussed, in addition to the district of Cidade, in 1910 the municipality of Paracatu was composed of ten other districts. Of these, the district of Rio Preto<sup>5</sup> is notably portrayed by Olympio Gonzaga (1910) as the most prosperous, having had, since 1882, two primary schools, one for each sex. In addition, the author himself was the teacher of one of them<sup>6</sup>, according to his account:

The female school has been taught for four years by the teacher, Mrs. Georgina Pimentel de Ulhôa, with an enrollment of 56 female students and 30 regular students. The male school has been taught for ten years by the teacher, Olympio Michael Gonzaga, the author of this work. The enrollment of this school is 75 students, with a frequency of 45 (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910, p. 96).

Also portrayed as having a certain prosperity, the Alegres district had a mixed primary school, run by the teacher Mrs. Etelvina de Rezende Costa, and a municipal school, run by citizen João Baptista Franco (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910). The Guarda-Mór district had a mixed public primary school, run by Mrs. Vianna Pereira da Rocha, and was prospering a lot, according to the judgment of Olympio Gonzaga (1910).

The situation in the Canna-Brava district was different, as Olympio Gonzaga (1910) considered that the region was in decline, even though it had a public mixed primary school, run by Mrs. Leontina Sciencia. For the teacher, the Caatinga district was also in decline, where there was even a mixed school, but it had been without a teacher for years (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910, p. 89). It is interesting to note that Olympio Gonzaga (1910) highlighted the unhealthiness of the region, reporting that many inhabitants of the district were victims of malarial fevers that spread from the banks of the Paracatu River (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910). Incidentally, this district is currently the quilombola community of Santana do Catinga (Silva, 2019), which highlights, once again, the deprivation of black children from the access to school.

In the Burity district, there was a mixed school, run by D. Amalia Ribeiro de Souza, and another school, in a village called São João da Pinduca, belonging to the district (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910). Despite the existence of the two schools, regarding the locality, Olympio Gonzaga (1910, p. 95) emphasizes: “There is no fair justice in the district, infested with murderers, who live peacefully, without even being charged, in many cases”. The district of Lages had, in its headquarters, a public school for boys, however it was without a teacher, and, in the village of Bom Fim, belonging to the district, a public school created in 1882, which, according to Olympio Gonzaga (1910,

<sup>5</sup> This is the current municipality of Unaí.

<sup>6</sup> In 1900, Olympio Gonzaga was appointed to the chair of the school in Rio Preto, according to the order of the Secretary of the Interior, published in the *Jornal Minas Geraes* (Secretarias..., 1900).

p. 91), “[...] is rarely staffed”. Regarding the Santo Antônio d’água Fria district, Olympio Gonzaga (1910, p. 90) believed that “[...] the lack of education is contributing to the people falling into illiteracy and disbelief in the civic duties of the citizen”.

In the district of Morrinhos<sup>7</sup>, the mixed public school had spent many years without a teacher, but had recently been provided with one, according to the writings of Olympio Gonzaga (1910). The teacher also pointed out that “[...] this town has a bad reputation due to the absolute lack of justice in the place, and the district is infested with murderers and troublemakers” (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910, p. 92). Finally, the situation in the district of Formoso<sup>8</sup> is described as follows: “Because it is 60 leagues away from Paracatu, without a mail line or a public school, the village of Formoso lives in isolation, infested with murderers and criminals, groping in illiteracy and backwardness” (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910, p. 93).

The descriptions produced by Olympio Gonzaga (1910) about several districts in the region are consistent with the imagery of an uncivilized and barbaric *sertão*. However, it is important to remember that this is a memory imbued with precepts and values of the time, combined with the teacher's personal point of view. The idea of the residents of these districts as rude, backward and uncivilized people is dispelled, for example, by the investigations of Almeida (2009). This researcher used oral history and chose the time period between 1924 and 1944 to study the districts of Formoso and Arinos, the latter previously called Morrinhos, both cited by Olympio Gonzaga (1910), as already indicated. The author demonstrated that, in that period, schools and education represented references of educability and civility for a large part of the population of those two districts, and that the efforts to promote education led by local residents were significant. In addition to deconstructing the image of the barbarians from *sertão*, their studies show that, even in these remote places, in the extreme northwest of the state, for many inhabitants, the image of school as an important educational institution was consolidated, at least since the beginning of the 20th century.

However, it is clear that, in contrast to the exceptions granted to a few, Olympio Gonzaga (1910) described with fanfare the situation of most of the villages and districts of Paracatu, where images of decadence, unhealthiness and ignorance prevailed. Notably, the absence of schools, or their precarious condition, was a variable that the teacher considered in this assessment and presented as having the potential to modify the deplorable scenario he described. This understanding was not exclusive to this teacher, since the very existence of primary schools subsidized by the municipality and by private institutions, in addition to those maintained by the state, attests to the local effort, although insufficient, for the development of education, and the importance given to education by the municipality.

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<sup>7</sup> Current municipality of Arinos.

<sup>8</sup> Current municipality of Formoso.

Another situation repeatedly pointed out by Olympio Gonzaga (1910) involving public education in Paracatu was the closing of the *Escola Normal* (or *Normal School*, in English) that existed there. For example, the success of the city's School Group is partly attributed by Olympio Gonzaga (1910, p. 74) to the training that its teaching staff had received at the *Escola Normal* de Paracatu, as we can infer from the professor's statement: "With excellent results, the Grupo Escolar de Paracatu is providing education and instruction to the youth, with the following teaching staff, composed of teachers from the old Escola Normal, whose absence is sorely felt [...]". Thus, the professor denounced the closing of the educational institution that trained teachers, the *Escola Normal*, previously located in the city district, as a setback for public education in the region:

On June 1, 1880, the Paracatu Externato and the Escola Normal were installed, the excellent professional education establishment that provided so many and such beneficial services towards the intellectual development of this extensive area of the *sertão* of Minas Gerais and which, unfortunately, was suppressed in 1906, as a mere cost-saving measure! (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910, p. 55).

In a region where the difficulty of finding teachers in primary education is a significant obstacle to the functioning of schools, it is not surprising that the closure of the Escola Normal was felt. The lament for the closure of the educational institution is repeated: "With the suppression of the Escola Normal, the city of Paracatu lost the best educational institution it ever had, and the greatest benefit it received from the State Government" (Olympio Gonzaga, 1910, p. 56). At the time, Minas Gerais was in a financial crisis, and the state's *Escolas Normais* were subject to budgetary restrictions, although they continued to be considered important for the development of primary education (Moreno & Vago, 2015).

In view of the above, we can see that, during the early decades of the Republic, in most districts of Paracatu, primary public education, although considered important, was marked by its absence, discontinuity and little attention from the state government. However, this precariousness contrasted with the conditions of the School Group, an institution that was the target of state and municipal investments in the education of children in the region. This means that the children living in the urban area of the Cidade district, where the School Group was located, had their education prioritized by the state, to the detriment of children from the rural areas of the suburban region and other districts. The latter, on the other hand, had their education restricted by the closing of schools triggered by the João Pinheiro reform in 1906, and also by the neglect of the government authorities towards those that remained in operation. It is important to note that poor and black children lived in these rural areas and districts.

## FINAL REMARKS

In the first decades of the republic, the municipality of Paracatu covered the entire northwest of Minas Gerais, characterized by a large area of predominantly rural areas, a large *sertão*, with scattered settlement centers and a more urban, isolated concentrations, seem like a reference of civilization. We were able to determine, in this study, that this urban center triggered the state and municipal primary public education policy for the entire northwest of Minas Gerais.

Despite the efforts of the local population to provide primary schools for their children, a fact that needs to be investigated, we have identified neglect on the part of the government, evidenced by the closure of schools, failure to send furniture and teaching materials, a lack of teachers and the rarity of visits by educational authorities to monitor school activities. Judging by the criteria legitimized in the context itself, described, for example, in the João Pinheiro reform, the vast majority of public primary schools in the northwest of Minas Gerais, in the first two decades of the 20th century, did not have the minimum conditions for operation. The notable exception, located in the supposedly restricted civilized portion of that *sertão*, was the School Group, where, apparently, the students had good conditions.

We know that the Brazilian Republic emerged in a deeply hierarchical and unequal society (Carvalho, 2017). And, at the dawn of this new regime, the people were proclaimed as the main recipients of government initiatives, but, in a short time, it became clear that the people were mostly out of school, while a small part of the population took it upon themselves (Souza, 1998). The analysis of the territorial distribution and operating conditions of public primary schools in the northwest of Minas Gerais allowed us to understand that, in this extensive region, the Brazilian scenario of unequal school provision repeated at the beginning of the 20th century, precisely at the origin of the implementation of regular and republican public schools. Because it was black and poor children who were the ones who suffered, since the region was home to this population in the various existing villages, we also reinforce that our research reaffirms Veiga's (2022) arguments about the existence of an unequal school provision and a socio-racial division in education.

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**NÁDIA BUENO REZENDE:** She holds a PhD in Education (UFMG - 2022) and is an EBT professor at the Federal Institute of Northern Minas Gerais.

**E-mail:** [nadia.rezende@ifnmg.edu.br](mailto:nadia.rezende@ifnmg.edu.br)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2337-3606>

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Carlos Eduardo Vieira (UFPR)

E-mail: [cevieira9@gmail.com](mailto:cevieira9@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6168-271X>

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