

Demarcating, educating: Parelhense's educational cartography of letters in the Sertão do Seridó of Rio Grande do Norte (1928-1930)

ARTICLE

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Abstract

This work is the result of research on the Anti-Illiteracy Advertising Plan, a project to eradicate illiteracy that took place in the city of Parelhas, Rio Grande do Norte, from 1928 to 1930, and was aligned with the set of rules and conduct imposed by the first republican governments. Given this, with the Sertão do Seridó region of Rio Grande do Norte as the main setting, this research concludes that educational processes, regardless of the era, influenced the organisation and changes in municipalities, as well as the way in which their agents understand their living space and develop sociability.

Keywords: Illiteracy. Municipalities. Hinterland. Parelhas.

Demarcar, educar: a cartografia educacional parelhense das letras no Sertão do Seridó norte-rio-grandense (1928-1930)

Resumo

O presente trabalho é o resultado da pesquisa acerca do Plano de Propaganda Contra o Analfabetismo, um projeto de erradicação contra o analfabetismo que ocorreu na cidade de Parelhas, Rio Grande do Norte, nos anos de 1928 até 1930, e alinhado ao conjunto de normas e condutas impostas pelos primeiros governos republicanos. Diante disso, tendo o Sertão do Seridó norte-rio-grandense como o principal cenário, esta pesquisa conclui que os processos educacionais, independente da época, influenciaram na organização e mudanças dos municípios, como também na forma como seus agentes compreendem seu espaço de vivência, bem como a forma desenvolvem sociabilidades.

Palavras-chave: Analfabetismo. Municípios. Sertão. Parelhas.

1 Introduction

By the late 1920s, the state of Rio Grande do Norte was already undergoing a process defined by the historian of education Jorge Nagle as *Pedagogical Optimism*, that

is, a growing concern with massive investment in the expansion of schools and teaching models aimed at eradicating illiteracy.

At the threshold of this context, not only this federative unit but much of the country witnessed the spread of low-cost¹ school models characterized by rapid instructional methods designed to reduce the number of illiterate individuals. These models gradually became part of the *sertanejo* (backlands) landscape.

An example of this can be observed in the *Escolas Rudimentares* (Rudimentary Schools), which required only a simple and emergency-based structure. They could be installed, for instance, in farmhouses, without the typical organization of a *Grupo Escolar* (School Group). Meeting all the characteristics mentioned above, when implemented in the backlands of Rio Grande do Norte they became a symbol of the advance of literacy throughout the remote areas of the state.

To understand how these schools functioned, their Internal Regulations from 1925, in Articles 1 and 2 of Chapter I, provides the following guideline:

Primary rudimentary education shall be provided throughout the territory of Rio Grande do Norte; its schools, whether fixed or itinerant, shall be created in neighborhoods, villages, or farms that have at least fifty illiterate individuals. The schools shall be mixed and shall include reading, writing, language, arithmetic, and general notions of useful knowledge. Municipal governments, associations, or private individuals interested in the school shall be responsible for providing the building, materials, and maintenance of the premises (Costa, 2021, p. 15).

From the excerpt above, one of the first characteristics that can be observed regarding this type of school is its versatility in terms of the spaces where it could be installed. First, it was mixed, allowing boys and girls to study together. Moreover, it could be established in a rural community or moved to other localities.

Another point worth noting is the emphasis on literacy and numeracy, which suggests an urgent need for learning these subjects so that citizens could read the laws,

¹ As an example, we may cite the São Paulo reform law signed by Washington Luís (Decree No. 3,356, of May 31, 1921) and, in Minas Gerais, Decrees No. 8,162 and No. 8,225, both issued in 1928, which regulated teacher education. Reforms such as these spread throughout the country, inspired by the capitals that embodied the nationhood ideal envisioned by the Republic.

understand the meaning of the National Symbols, and become aware of the recommendations of republican order and civility. Arithmetic, in turn, contributed to forming an understanding of the technologies and transformations in the world of work that were beginning to take place in the region.

In Parelhas, a municipality located in the Sertão do Seridó region of Rio Grande do Norte, the *Plano de Propaganda Contra o Analfabetismo* (Campaign Plan Against Illiteracy), created in 1928 during the administration of Mayor Florêncio Luciano, aimed not only to advance literacy among the population but also to organize and control the educational targets of the city. Thus, it was not enough merely to teach reading and writing—it was also necessary to instruct citizens in new patterns of behavior that would shape them according to republican ideals.

In addition, the implementation of this literacy project promoted new dialogues between the *Sertão* (backlands) and the coast. As the State Department of Education, along with agencies such as the Department of Statistics, sent telegrams to demand student attendance or to request enrollment data (such as age, sex, and address), a network for the exchange of information was established. This communicative flow enabled long-distance monitoring of educational activities in the Sertão in relation to those already in place in the capital.

The focus here is on the work of the commissions created to demarcate, supervise, and include individuals in literacy processes, revealing how such actions linked the Sertão do Seridó to republican pedagogical projects at both the state and national levels.

For this purpose, we use the term *educational cartography*, as we understand that, as this project advanced through the urban area and especially through the rural zone of Parelhas, the municipality's geographic landscape underwent changes. With the expansion of the Rudimentary Schools, strategies were developed to reach as many places as possible where illiteracy persisted. In connection with this, we bring into the discussion the concept of Pedagogical Municipality, a term coined by the historian and education researcher Justino Magalhães (2014; 2019). His main idea is to think of the

organization of municipalities through the educational processes being implemented in them—that is, to understand their influence within the contexts in which they are created and executed.

Thus, when we speak of the municipality of Parelhas, once dedicated almost exclusively to agriculture and livestock, we see that it also became a center for the dissemination of literacy and educational formation among its population. “To experience is to learn; it means to act upon what is given and to create from it. What is given cannot be known in its essence” (Tuan, 1983, p. 10). In this sense, for the Rudimentary Schools to be established, it was necessary to identify those in need of their services and subsequently inspect them. As the historian Yi-Fu Tuan theorizes, a certain reality can be understood through the construct of experience, and in this case, an educational experience was emerging.

For this plan to achieve the desired success, it was necessary to identify the areas where illiteracy most strongly affected the population of Parelhas. Consequently, processes of inspection and statistical verification became crucial, as they not only provided an overview of the state of education and instruction but also helped Mayor Florêncio Luciano to map out the individuals seeking literacy.

In some excerpts from the documentation of the Campaign Plan Against Illiteracy, which will be presented later, illiteracy is described as a “damned plague” present in the municipality. This leads us to understand that it was perceived as a kind of “worm” entrenched in the society of Parelhas and in need of an “effective treatment,” as the documents suggest.

To demarcate, above all, meant to detect the symptoms of this “disease” that illiteracy represented, and education was considered the best remedy to cure such an affliction. To better illustrate this relationship between illiteracy and illness, we draw on the example presented by the educator Vanilda Pereira Paiva (1973) in her work *Educação Popular e Educação de Adultos: contribuição à história da educação brasileira* (*Popular Education and Adult Education: a contribution to the history of Brazilian*

education). In it, quoting a statement by Miguel Couto, a member of the Academy of Medicine of Rio de Janeiro, she highlighted:

Illiteracy is not only a considerable factor in the general etiology of diseases, but a true disease, and one of the most serious. Defeated in the struggle for life, the illiterate person, devoid of needs and ambitions, opposes either the dead weight of his indolence or the living weight of his rebellion to every idea of progress, always perceiving, in the prosperity of those who triumph through cultivated intelligence, a theft, an extortion, an injustice. Such is the health of the soul, and so too of the body: he suffers and makes others suffer; through negligence he contracts diseases, and through abandonment he spreads and perpetuates them [...] (Miguel Couto *apud* Paiva, 1973, p. 99).

In this sense, when considered a disease—and one of the most serious—illiteracy was seen as an obstacle to the country's progress. The citizen, once “infected” by the desire to learn and to know the written word, would consequently develop the ability to contribute to the advancement of his community. However, it is necessary to understand the broader scope and effects that this Literacy Plan produced beyond its primary goal of instruction. It is essential to consider the reorganization of social processes, the transformations occurring in the urban environment, and, consequently, education as a valuable instrument of that process.

The Campaign Plan Against Illiteracy directly and indirectly influenced both physical transformations, through the construction of new school buildings, and social transformations. The process of literacy changed the way students began to understand their municipality and the country itself. It was a republican literacy project, whose main purpose was to shape citizens who were aware of the order and values they were expected to follow. Thus, this process, which took place in the city of Parelhas at the end of the 1920s, will be examined through two perspectives: the work of the Commissions for the Campaign Against Illiteracy and the implementation of the censuses carried out by these groups. The decision to focus on this scope lies largely in understanding the dialogues that linked the Sertão and the coast when the expansion of education was at stake.

To understand how this process was implemented, we will use sources related to ordinances, decrees, laws, and the report from Mayor Florêncio Luciano's term of office. The goal is to make the reader aware of how the work of the historian of education made it possible, in this case, to observe two highly significant phenomena: how the Sertão can be read through the lens of educational practices, and how this educational experience in that city contributed to the formation of a pedagogical municipality.

This perspective, aimed at understanding the early educational processes in the city of Parelhas, invites us to traverse not only this locality but also the dialogues that connected the Sertão with the rest of the country through the educational practices of the time.

Accordingly, this article is organized into two sections. The first presents the context of the Plan's formulation and the logic behind the establishment of the educational commissions; the second analyzes the censuses as a practice of producing an educational cartography within the municipality of Parelhas.

2 Demarcating and supervising to promote literacy: the educational cartography of the Campaign Plan Against Illiteracy

In brief words, the President congratulates the Municipal Mayor for his wise choice, knowing so well how to distinguish among so many sons of this noble land now present, those who were chosen for the most ennobling mission possible—to open, for the poor blind to the divine light of knowledge, the breach through which the sublime current of enlightenment will flow, guided by the straight path of wisdom toward dreamlike horizons (Excerpt from the Minutes of the Central Commission for the Campaign Against Illiteracy, April 5, 1929).

In 1929, the Campaign Plan Against Illiteracy in the city of Parelhas was on the rise. The excerpt from the minutes that opens this section not only contextualizes a meeting of some members of the Plan but also gives us a sense of what was happening in Parelhas's educational field at that time.

The quotation that introduces this section is part of the sources that served as the foundation for the reflections discussed throughout this article. The reading of this

archival collection began with the minutes of meetings that planned the implementation of the Plan through school censuses, the municipal laws that governed education during that period, and the requests to track the attendance of students enrolled in local institutions. In addition, the administrative report presented by Mayor Florêncio Luciano to the legislative body of Parelhas in 1930, referring to the preceding years, proved essential to understanding the intentions behind the establishment of the Plan.

What, then, did we find in the boxes of the Parelhas Municipal Public Archive? Numerous documents that serve as clues and evidence capable of confirming—or at least guiding—our understanding of what this educational project, conceived during the mayor's first term, represented.

The Plan was structured as a proposal to eradicate illiteracy and, during its execution, employed several strategies to ensure the achievement of its goals. To better understand how the Plan's activities operated, this study discusses the creation of the Urban, Rural, and Central Commissions Against Illiteracy, which played key roles in identifying and supervising those who would be taught to read and write under the initiative of that pedagogical municipality.

Although analyzing the activities of these commissions is not sufficient to detail every educational process carried out by the Plan in its day-to-day operations, investigating their various functions allows us to grasp how enrollment, attendance, and instruction were organized and conducted.

The structure of the Plan was simultaneously conceived and discussed in the minutes of the Commissions' meetings. It also materialized through the establishment of Rudimentary Schools and the organization of the entire pedagogical system. Furthermore, it involved student supervision through inspections conducted at both the municipal and state levels, as well as requests for school materials submitted by the teachers participating in the Plan to the Municipal Government. Finally, it included the preparation of reports sent to Natal, which contained information about students and their attendance in the schools served by this public policy.

Education was regarded as a fundamental path, since it not only sought to eliminate an evil such as illiteracy—present both in the country and in the local context studied—but also contributed to the dissemination of new knowledge, the internalization of values, and the moral and civic formation of the municipality's inhabitants. In this way, it strengthened patriotic feelings and the construction of a national identity. As Buriti (2004, p. 3) observes:

Immersed in high rates of illiteracy that reached nearly 80% at the beginning of the twentieth century, Brazil needed to expand the number of school places, hire teachers and principals, build schools, create a ministry devoted to educational issues, and mobilize qualified intellectuals to eradicate one of the nation's great shames: illiteracy (Buriti, 2004, p. 03).

In this sense, most of the needs cited above were addressed by the Campaign Plan Against Illiteracy, which leads us to believe that educational dialogue and influence were in wide circulation throughout the country, and, moreover, that they placed the Sertão on a level of contemporaneity with the educational activities taking place in other parts of Brazil.

The construction and investment in an educational structure sought to shape a new ideal of the Brazilian citizen, linked to national symbols and the modern values that inspired the main republican leaders. This project, modeled after a European conception of society, also aimed to redesign the figure of the *homem sertanejo*—no longer identified solely with agriculture or cotton cultivation, which was already expanding in the early 1920s, but with that of an educated individual, attentive to the civilizing transformations of his time.

The municipal law that authorized the implementation of this educational Plan corresponds to Article 18(b) of Law No. 07, dated September 26, 1928. However, the expansion of this initiative took place from 1929 onward, when efforts and regulations were established to broaden education in the municipality through the creation of the Central, Urban, and Rural Commissions Against Illiteracy, which coincided with the expansion of education at the state level.

Therefore, the entire process was not managed solely by the municipal government. The educational logistics driven by the ideal of expanding and modernizing the Sertão through schooling were established through a process of mapping both the spaces and the individuals to be educated. This occurred through the supervision of classes and the regular monitoring of students by the government of the State of Rio Grande do Norte, which at that time was represented by figures such as Amphilóquio Câmara² and Nestor dos Santos Lima³, both involved in state-level inspection and oversight efforts.

In this sense, the fight against illiteracy in the society of Parelhas was structured through the work of these commissions and the implementation of the censuses they carried out. Another relevant aspect was the appointment of teachers and the creation of Rudimentary Schools, which began to reshape both the urban and rural landscapes of the municipality. This also reflected the public investment made in physical infrastructure and human resources to ensure the functioning of the schools and the education system as a whole.

Based on these findings, we now turn to discuss the educational trajectory of the Plan, presenting part of the documentation analyzed—specifically, the minutes of the meetings held by members of the literacy project, written during the same period in which the educational initiative was being implemented in Parelhas.

These materials, beyond recording the discussions of the commissions about the censuses, enrollments, and student attendance, as well as accounts of the harm caused by illiteracy to the population, also reveal the aspirations and expressions of care among the Plan's members regarding the educational future of Parelhas.

One of the analyzed excerpts, from the minutes of the meeting held on April 9, 1929, contains the following statement:

² Amphilóquio Câmara, who had served as an education inspector since 1911, was responsible for overseeing schools in the state of Rio Grande do Norte.

³ Nestor Lima, Director General of Public Instruction between 1924 and 1929, stood out as an important intellectual in the field of education. The connection between both figures—Câmara and Lima—and the Campaign Plan Against Illiteracy is analyzed by Farias (2021) in her master's thesis, available at: <https://repositorio.ufrn.br/items/63df7b5d-e0e6-4709-a485-9e137587cc4d>.

[...] made a vehement appeal to all sons of this land, and especially to the members of the Rural Commission, urging them to launch a determined campaign against the cursed plague of primary illiteracy. It was their duty, as members of the Rural Commission, to employ every means within their reach—encouraging, assisting, and persuading parents and children—about the immeasurable superiority of the man who can read over the illiterate (PARELHAS, 1929d, n.p.).

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As can be seen in the excerpt above, the concern of those involved in this educational endeavor carried a tone of urgency and even despair to eliminate what they called the “damned plague” of illiteracy. Through this process, after absorbing a discursive movement that had begun at the national level, the Plan initiated in Parelhas a kind of diagnosis to assess the “educational health” of its citizens. Once this was done, the project began to apply one of its “treatments” to cure this “disease” afflicting the population, seeking to remove that obstacle to the development of the local community.

In this context, persuading and ensuring the participation of parents in this campaign was of fundamental importance for the success of the Plan. Hence the idea of promoting education as a form of propaganda against illiteracy: if parents and other citizens of Parelhas became aware of the importance of literacy for their children, they would become additional allies in disseminating this effort to eradicate illiteracy.

The tradition of a daily life centered almost exclusively on agriculture and land management contrasted with a new way of life. This emerging perspective sought to foster sociability and to implement projects capable of raising the municipality to a level of progress comparable to that observed in other parts of the country. This contrast was decisive in incorporating into the educational discourse a persuasive appeal to the parents of prospective students, encouraging them to take part, even indirectly, in this transformation alongside their children.

For this reason, in urging, assisting, and persuading members of the Rural Commission to eliminate what they called a “damned plague,” the members of the Central Commission, as recorded in the minutes of their meetings, discussed how far the

project could reach the rural zones and stressed the urgency of serving as many illiterate individuals as possible.

From this point on, the Rural, Central, and Urban Commissions Against Illiteracy were created simultaneously with the implementation of the Plan. Their first task was to conduct school censuses, followed by gathering information on student attendance once they were enrolled in a local educational institution. Their role was to report to the municipal government and its departments detailed records of students who were or would be enrolled in the Rudimentary Schools, as well as to monitor attendance and teaching activities (Farias & Andrade, 2019). It is worth noting that the members of these commissions included teachers, municipal employees from Parelhas, and even the mayor's wife.

As part of this mapping effort, these commissions documented the name of each future student, their birthplace, age, parentage, whether they lived in the urban or rural zone, whether they were enrolled in any school, and whether they could already read. In this regard, Ordinance No. 20, issued on March 20, 1929, defined the creation of these boards, as follows:

The municipal mayor of Parelhas, in accordance with the powers granted by Article 18(b) of Law No. 7, of September 26, 1928, hereby establishes the Commissions for the Campaign Against Illiteracy in the municipality, without any burden to the municipal treasury, appointing the following: the first, a "CENTRAL COMMISSION" composed of three members—President, Vice President, and Secretary; the second, an "URBAN COMMISSION" composed of ten members, which shall be governed by the instructions issued by the Central Commission and remain directly subordinate to the Municipal Government, from which it shall receive guidance (PARELHAS, 1929b, n.p.).

In addition to these two commissions, Ordinance No. 23, issued on March 21, 1929, created the Rural Commission Against Illiteracy, which had the same responsibilities as the other two commissions mentioned above and was also subordinated to the Central Commission Against Illiteracy.

It is understood, therefore, that these groups represented the decentralization of this educational process. Acting as both the receivers of those to be educated and the

supervisors of the ongoing instruction, the commissions played a crucial role in providing the municipality with a specific and organized educational structure. This structure facilitated the collection and dissemination of statistical information, which would later be sent to the Department of Education in Natal, as will be discussed further on (Farias & Andrade, 2019).

It is also worth highlighting that the use of the term *propaganda* in the titles of both the Plan and its commissions can be problematized when we consider its meaning as the dissemination of an idea or project. In this case, the goal was to “propagate” or intensify an educational initiative that would attract the citizens of the municipality to the interests of Florêncio Luciano’s administration and to the broader republican and modernizing agenda.

In this sense, these groups were made up of several members who, being closer to the illiterate population, began to demarcate and later articulate the pedagogical cartography of Parelhas through their work within an information network established in the municipality. This network allowed the mayor to visualize the educational geography of the local situation regarding illiteracy. The members of the commissions thus became the pedagogical machinery necessary to keep the Plan functioning harmoniously.

An example of this informational network can be found in a passage from the Plan’s documentation, which specifies the duties of the Central Commission for the Campaign Against Illiteracy and the roles of each of its members:

It is the responsibility of the Central Commission for the Campaign Against Illiteracy, headquartered in this city:

- To provide instructions to the Rural Commissions in all matters deemed necessary for the eradication of illiteracy in the municipality, informing the Mayor, in monthly reports, of the measures taken and their results, such as enrollments, average attendance, progress, lists of enrolled and unenrolled individuals provided by the Municipal Government, with explanations of the reasons for non-enrollment and absences.
- The President of the Central Commission shall also serve as the Municipal School Inspector, carrying out monthly inspections of all municipal schools and submitting to the Mayor detailed reports on the findings of such visits, etc., etc. (PARELHAS, 1929c, n.p.).

Within this triad of educational monitoring commissions, the Central Commission

for the Campaign Against Illiteracy stood, as its name suggests, at the center of the entire process. It was responsible for collecting information from the two other educational boards (Rural and Urban) and for reporting the progress of educational activities to the municipal mayor.

At first, it is essential to highlight two main aspects. The first concerns the group's commitment to guiding the Rural Commission on the procedures necessary to achieve the eradication of illiteracy, as well as keeping Mayor Florêncio Luciano informed about the educational activities already underway. The second relates to the specific duties of the President of the Central Commission, who was responsible for conducting monthly inspections of all municipal schools and submitting to the Mayor "a detailed report of everything that occurred therein" (Portaria, 1929c, n.p.).

It is also important to note that the Central Commission was organized into three positions—President, Vice President, and Secretary—and that, in addition to this body, the Urban Commission Against Illiteracy also operated within the headquarters of the Parelhas Municipal Government.

Although they shared common goals, the two commissions performed distinct functions. The Central Commission was responsible for handling the demands forwarded by the Rural Commissions, while the Urban Commission was in charge of supervising education within the city, particularly through inspections carried out at the Barão do Rio Branco School Group.

The aforementioned Urban Commission, composed of ten members, was required to submit monthly reports on attendance, enrollment, and school routines to the Central Commission, which would then forward the same information to Mayor Florêncio Luciano. It can thus be understood that these Commissions functioned as the mechanisms driving the implementation of the Plan and ensuring its continued operation.

In this way, all these groups became educational tentacles. The distribution of responsibilities within the Plan was crucial for identifying the problem of illiteracy in Parelhas. Based on this diagnosis, an effort was initiated to inject into the "veins" of the municipal system — that is, into the population itself — the remedy capable of combating

such an adversity. After all, “the illiterate person opposes either the dead weight of his indolence or the living weight of his rebellion to every idea of progress” (Couto, 1925, p. 701).

3 Censuses as a practice for producing an educational cartography in the municipality of Parelhas

The censuses became one of the main tools used by the Commissions in the municipality of Parelhas. More than merely gathering data on the absence of literacy, these documents also revealed a local narrative—one that reflected both the place itself and the individuals who described it. The areas included in the investigations to detect illiteracy were recorded according to a perspective characteristic of the municipality, as shown in this excerpt from a census conducted by members of the Rural Commission, appointed under Ordinance No. 16 of 1929:

The Municipal Mayor of Parelhas hereby appoints citizens João Manoel da Silva and Simião Oliveira to carry out the census of the school-age and adult illiterate population up to 20 years of age in two zones. The first begins at the residence of citizen Bernardino de Senna e Silva, in the Joaseiro property, and the second at the residence of citizen Antonio Garcia, in the Boa Vista property, both within this municipality, collecting the following data: name, parentage, place of birth, residence, and whether or not the individual can read and write and whether they attend public or private schools. Each zone shall have a radius of half a league from the starting point (PARELHAS, 1929a, n.p.).

This excerpt provides a detailed idea of how the census operated—highlighting both the areas to be mapped in relation to future students and the boundaries from which the census began and to which it extended. It is important to consider how far the fight against illiteracy reached across all corners of Parelhas, not just the urban zone, transforming discourse into an instructional practice. This diagnosis was of fundamental importance, as it gave census takers an understanding of the locations and individuals who were to be included in the literacy process and, consequently, in the establishment of the Rudimentary Schools.

To analyze how these censuses shaped an educational cartography of Parelhas in the late 1920s, we draw upon the reflections of historian Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (2005), particularly his conception of space as both practice and the result of the interactions of its agents. According to Certeau:

Space exists whenever one takes into account vectors of direction, quantities of speed, and the variable of time. Space is a crossing of moving elements. It is, in a sense, animated by the ensemble of movements unfolding within it. Space is the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and cause it to function as a polyvalent unity of conflicting programs or contractual proximities (Certeau, 1998, p. 202).

Certeau's (1998) concept of space helps us understand that, when the Commissions for the Campaign Against Illiteracy began their census activities, they effectively created a pedagogical environment dedicated to the Plan's operations. Within the city of Parelhas—beyond its agricultural, livestock, and modest commercial dimensions—a new domain was being developed, one that corresponded to emerging educational processes.

This new geographic characterization emerged from the very censuses that mapped the problem of illiteracy among the population, resulting in a network of information exchange and educational investment for the illiterate. Thus, the Campaign Plan Against Illiteracy constituted a major historical space of investment at that time, one that reinforced the historicity of place through education while also encompassing the ideals of progress and civility.

This discussion takes us back to the first part of this article, where we introduced the concept of *educational cartography*. The interplay of these mobile commissions established in Parelhas a new spatial category—one shaped for and by education—that gradually transformed the cultural organization of the municipality.

In this sense, the descriptions presented in the census records reveal not only the spatial order of places, that is, the starting points of the research, but also the intention of seeking something. What emerges, then, is the structure of a spatial trajectory. Through this process, the city was endowed with a pedagogical orientation derived from its own

mode of organization, its *modus vivendi*, ranging from the creation of school institutions to educational practices in general.

In this framework, the city of Parelhas became enmeshed in a web of power relations represented by laws, decrees, and educational actions—such as the census itself—producing a spatial structure as a form of narrative in which “the entire chain of specialized operations is punctuated by references to what it produces (a representation of places) or to what it implies (a local order)” (Certeau, 1998, p. 205).

By relating the evidence found in the documentation of the Campaign Plan Against Illiteracy to Michel de Certeau’s reflections on the concepts of space and place, we can now conclude the reasoning previously developed. Bringing Certeau’s insights into the dynamics of the Plan allows us to understand that *space*, conceived as practice, corresponded to the process of census-taking and the demarcations it produced. *Place*, on the other hand, manifested in the very constitution of the Rudimentary Schools, whose stability established an order from which new and modern social relations emerged—relations fostered by the educational actions carried out in Parelhas, particularly during the 1920s.

4 Final considerations

Based on the discussions developed throughout this study, the objective was to demonstrate, through a specific research focus, how an educational experience in the Sertão do Seridó aligned with pedagogical activities carried out at both the state and national levels. It also sought to show how certain microstructures, such as the Commissions for the Campaign Against Illiteracy, became mechanisms through which literacy initiatives were monitored and regulated.

The analyses undertaken make it possible to understand that the Campaign Plan Against Illiteracy, implemented in Parelhas between 1928 and 1930, represented not only a policy for expanding rudimentary education but also an instrument of municipal reorganization and social discipline. The commissions created under the Plan acted as

vectors of a republican civilizing project, producing an educational cartography that connected the Sertão to the broader directives of state modernization.

The censuses conducted by the Urban, Central, and Rural Commissions thus emerge as practices that contributed to the construction of Parelhas's educational cartography. By identifying, mapping, and classifying the illiterate population, these actions not only operationalized the literacy policy but also instituted a new way of perceiving and organizing municipal space according to pedagogical criteria.

The commissions and the census, therefore, can be understood as governmental technologies that articulated knowledge, control, and territorialization, helping to consolidate the municipality as a space structured by the educational logics of the republican project.

We conclude that the Plan's physical and symbolic structure succeeded in transforming the municipality into a kind of pedagogical laboratory aimed at eradicating illiteracy. By creating Commissions, promoting civic parades, building schools, offering classes, conducting censuses, supervising participants, and conceiving the school as a space for the production of new agents and forms of sociability, the Campaign Plan Against Illiteracy became a singular example of an educational experiment in Seridó, in the Sertão, and in Brazil.

Therefore, this study contributes to the historiographical debate by highlighting how local microstructures incorporated and reinterpreted broader educational policies. Regarding its limitations, it is worth noting the absence of oral sources and school records that might provide access to the experiences of those who were literate through the program. Future research could focus on reconstructing these memories, thereby expanding the understanding of the meanings attributed to literacy in the interior of the northern region of Seridó, in Rio Grande do Norte.

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