



***Regentes Escolares* and poor children's literacy promotion in Portugal (1930-1976)**

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ABSTRACT. From 1930 onwards, incomplete schools were created, later designated teaching posts and school posts, in Portugal. A measure that seemed positive to reach isolated populations, without school or minimum conditions to retain teachers to combat illiteracy, revealed a different nature. This article aims to show how these teaching posts were aimed at the most disadvantaged sections of the population, whether rural or on the outskirts of cities; characterise the literacy of poor children and the existential situation of these teaching agents. The work is based on a literature review and investigations by the authors in institutional and district archives and collections from schools within the scope of projects financed by the FCT. The historical documentation analysis allows us to verify that *regentes escolares* replaced teachers who graduated from Normal Schools. *Regentes* were teaching agents whose necessary qualification was, in general, only having the 4th grade, having good moral behaviour and showing adherence to the regime. They earned half the salary of a teacher, were from the local area and were almost exclusively women. There would be no danger of circulating 'foreign' ideas, behaviours or values to the community. The *regentes escolares* functioned as a form of control over teachers since the former could easily replace the latter. Compulsory schooling was reduced to the 3rd grade. Children were prepared to listen to the priest's sermon on Sundays and work from dawn to dusk, with no other ambitions than having 'four whitewashed walls' to live on.

Keywords: education of poor children; dictatorship in Portugal; depreciation of teaching agents; minimum learning; illiteracy.

Regentes escolares e alfabetização de crianças pobres em Portugal (1930-1976)

RESUMO. A partir de 1930, são criadas as escolas incompletas, mais tarde designadas 'postos de ensino e postos escolares' em Portugal. Uma medida que parecia positiva para chegar a populações isoladas, sem escola nem condições mínimas de fixar professores/as, para combater o analfabetismo, revelou uma natureza diversa. Os objetivos deste artigo são mostrar como estes postos de ensino se dirigiram às camadas mais desfavorecidas da população quer rural quer da periferia das cidades; caracterizar a alfabetização das crianças pobres e a situação existencial destes agentes de ensino. O trabalho está alicerçado numa revisão da literatura e em investigações dos autores em arquivos institucionais, distritais e na recolha junto das escolas, no âmbito de projetos financiados pela FCT. A análise histórica da documentação permite verificar que os/as professores/as diplomados pelas Escolas Normais foram sendo substituídos pelas/os 'regentes escolares'. Agentes de ensino, cuja habilitação necessária era, em geral, apenas possuírem a 4.^a classe, ter bom comportamento moral e mostrarem adesão ao regime. Ganhavam metade do ordenado de um/a professor/a, eram oriundas/os dos próprios locais e foram quase exclusivamente mulheres. Não haveria o perigo de fazerem circular ideias, comportamentos ou valores 'estranhos' à comunidade. Funcionaram como uma forma de controlo dos/as professores/as, uma vez que podiam ser facilmente substituídos/as por *regentes*. A escolaridade obrigatória baixou para a 3.^a classe. As crianças estavam preparadas para ouvir o sermão do padre aos domingos, trabalhar de sol a sol, sem outras ambições do que chegar a ter 'quatro paredes caiadas' para viver.

Palavras chave: educação de crianças pobres; ditadura em Portugal; desqualificação dos agentes de ensino; aprendizagens mínimas; analfabetismo.

Regentes escolares y alfabetización de niños/as pobres en Portugal (1930-1976)

RESUMEN. A partir de 1930, se crearon escuelas incompletas, luego designadas puestos de enseñanza y puestos escolares en Portugal. Una medida que parecía positiva para llegar a poblaciones aisladas, sin escuela ni condiciones mínimas para retener a los docentes, para combatir el analfabetismo, reveló un carácter diferente. Los objetivos de este artículo son mostrar cómo estos puestos de enseñanza estaban

dirigidos a los sectores más desfavorecidos de la población, ya fuera rural o de la periferia de las ciudades; caracterizar la alfabetización de los niños pobres y la situación existencial de estos agentes docentes. El trabajo se basa en una revisión de la literatura y en investigaciones de los autores en archivos institucionales y distritales y en colecciones de escuelas, en el marco de proyectos financiados por la FCT. El análisis histórico de la documentación nos permite comprobar que los profesores/as egresados/as de las Escuelas Normales fueron reemplazados por *regentes escolares*. Agentes docentes, cuya calificación necesaria era, en general, tener sólo el cuarto grado, tener buena conducta moral y mostrar adherencia al régimen. Ganaban la mitad del salario de un/a profesor/a, eran del área local y eran casi exclusivamente mujeres. No habría peligro de hacer circular ideas, comportamientos o valores 'extranjeros' a la comunidad. Funcionaban como una forma de control sobre los profesores/as, ya que podían ser fácilmente reemplazados por *regentes*. La escolaridad obligatoria se redujo al tercer grado. Los niños/as estaban preparados para escuchar el sermón del cura los domingos, trabajaban de sol a sol, sin más ambición que tener 'cuatro paredes encaladas' para vivir.

Palabras-clave: Educación de niños pobres; dictadura en Portugal; descalificación de agentes docentes; aprendizajes mínimos; analfabetismo.

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Introduction: the sociopolitical context in Portugal in the 1930s¹

The military coup of May 28, 1926, ended the First Republic, starting the Dictatorship, which would last for 48 years, constituting the longest dictatorship in Europe in the 20th century (Hobsbawm, 1995). It is important to emphasise that the 'revolution', as it was called, gained a broad consensus in Portuguese society, which was significantly weakened by the governmental instability that had characterised the First Republic, an illustrative example of which was the forty Ministers of Education who held office since 1913, the date from the definitive creation of the Ministry of Public Instruction, until the end of the First Republic – which amounts to an average of one new minister every four months (Carvalho, 2011).

This change was, at least initially, supported by various sectors of Portuguese society, given the expectations created and the conviction that the new regime would be capable of finally organising and structuring the State, as well as appeasing conflicts. The Army was clearly involved, having assumed responsibility for the coup and the country's governance, so the first period of the Dictatorship is commonly referred to as the Military Dictatorship. Even after this phase, the Army was one of the fundamental pillars of the Dictatorship, not least because of the power it was given to exercise (Telo, 1994, p. 788). They were military personnel who presided over the municipal administrative commissions appointed by the Government, as the municipalities no longer had an elected mayor (Sousa, 2013). According to Sousa (2013, p. 17, our translation), in the case of Porto, "[...] army officers, exclusive between 1926-1933, give way to university professors, doctors and engineers between 1933-1949, return one last time in the years 1949-1953, and from then on, engineers succeeded them".

The Church was another strong ally of the Dictatorship, given the aggressive secularisation measures of the Republic: direct interference in the pastoral care and action of bishops, the law separating the State and the Church, the expulsion of religious orders and the nationalisation of their assets, etc. All this despite different sensibilities among Republicans on the religious issue. In addition to the reaction of the clergy, with a collective pastoral letter which challenged political power, there was an intervention by Pope Pius X, supporting the pastoral letter of the Portuguese bishops but calling on the Church to accept the new regime and remain independent of any specific party action (Abreu, 2010). However, relations only began to stabilise after the military coup of 1926. Nonetheless, the great convergence of interests and world vision between Salazar and Cardinal Cerejeira must be highlighted.

The Dictatorship was also supported by the landowning sector (Mónica, 1978; Telo, 1994), with the peasants living more or less ignored, in extreme poverty. Perhaps more surprising is the support from the labour movement, justified by the expectation that the country's serious economic and financial situation would be resolved and because it was heavily punished with retaliation against the strikers by the Republic and its economic policies. Also, republicans and democrats, such as António Sérgio, João de Barros and Bento de Jesus Caraça, "[...] welcomed the new situation" (Carvalho, 2011, p. 720, our translation). The Teachers' Union, a strong sector of non-worker trade unionism, was unhappy with the lack of effectiveness of successive

¹ We thank Doctor Céu Basto for her contribution and for providing some data for creating this article.

governments and believed, at first, that, by not harassing the military, they could obtain support for some of their claims. Furthermore, they believed in their strength among the population and belatedly understood the new methods and the systematicity of repression (Felgueiras, 2008). The social problems worsened because of participation in the First World War, the pneumonic pandemic, and the tremendous economic crisis, which required a strong government, unity of action, and a clear policy in search of solutions. The privileged feared the streets and the Revolution, and everyone believed the army could establish the necessary national consensus.

However, the early days of the Dictatorship were no less unstable than the First Republic. In 1926, there were five ministers of education: Mendes Cabeçadas, military, took office in May; Gama Ochoa, also a soldier, Mendes dos Remédios and Ricardo Jorge, all in June, were ministers only for a few days (well below the four-month average of the First Republic); and Alfredo de Magalhães, from November of that year until April 1928.

During this period, Salazar accepted the invitation to the Ministry of Finance for the first time, a position he held from May 30, 1926, also for a few days. He left and accepted a new invitation to join the government, but on the condition that the remaining ministries were subordinate to him. Then, he was sworn in again as Minister of Finance on April 27, 1928, with engineer Duarte Pacheco having been Minister of Education for nine days.

After just seven months in managing the department, Duarte Pacheco was replaced by Gustavo Cordeiro Ramos, professor of Germanic Literature at the Faculty of Arts, who would become, shortly, the first personality who proved himself capable of corresponding to Salazar's pedagogical thinking (Carvalho, 2011, p. 725, our translation).

Cordeiro Ramos' first stint in government would last just seven months. In the second half of 1929, four more ministers of education followed: Silva Teles, between July and September; Costa Ferreira, also a soldier, between September and November; Ivens Ferraz, between November and December; and Duarte de Lemos, between December and January 1930. The latter was replaced again by Cordeiro Ramos, who remained in office until 1933. It should be noted, however, that the choice of Cordeiro Ramos as Minister of Education was reinforced by Salazar when he assumed the Presidency of the Ministry in July 1932 and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers in April of the following year, when the 1933 Constitution came into force.

The dismantling of republican ideas in education: from children's literacy to the single school

This period between 1926 and 1933, self-designated as the National Dictatorship, was marked by significant instability, even though several educational measures announced what was to come. The biggest concern seems to be dismantling the republican school. As there is no clear project for education, the social setback brought by the Dictatorship is unequivocal. Since teacher training and the characterisation of the school of the Dictatorship (1926-1974) and its social effects are some of the most present themes in the historiography of education in Portugal, we chose not to present a specific literature review item but rather to insert it carefully, step by step, as we present the topic under analysis and cite authors and reference sources.

The first of these educational measures, on June 8, 1926, consisted of ceasing "[...] co-education in all centres with a population of more than 5:000 inhabitants, as long as there is more than one teaching position there" (Law No. 1880, 1926). It was annulled, however, a few days later because it was 'approved only by the Senate of the Republic' and because, what seems more substantive, 'the execution of this law, which is partly unenforceable, would bring a serious disruption to primary education services'. (Decree No. 11795, 1926).

There were always difficulties in fully implementing education separated by sex during the Dictatorship, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, as shown by Maria Filomena Mónica (1978) and Guinote (2006). Despite the various measures taken during the Dictatorship, which sought to limit co-education in the name of morals and good customs, there was always the possibility of exception in villages with a single school and a single teacher, for example. This meant that mixed education was always practised in many villages in the country, not exactly co-educational, as there was specific content for girls, such as learning how to hem, sew on buttons and some embroidery stitches.

António Nóvoa (2005, p. 75, our translation) refers to an important aspect of this discussion, because it contradicts overly simplistic views regarding the differences between republicans and nationalists: during the First Republic, "[...] the coeducation regime had an ephemeral duration [...] and, even so, in a very imperfect

way". Take the example of the first level of primary education: in the 1911 Reform, co-education was an exception that was accepted only when 'the low density of the school population' did not allow the founding of a school for each sex; in the 1919 Reform, on the contrary, the co-educational regime was adopted².

Still in June, another significant measure was the extinction of Upper Primary Schools (Decree No. 11730, 1926)³. In the First Republic, the reform of infant, primary and normal education of March 29, 1911, had established primary education with three levels: elementary (lasting three years, mandatory), complementary (two years) and upper (three years). The 1919 reform combined the first two degrees into what was now called general primary education (lasting five years, mandatory) and operationalised upper primary education (lasting three years).

The latter had the aim of comprehensive education, which would prepare for later professional choices and respond to the needs of municipal civil servants and the small bourgeoisie of the villages, education that would give access to Normal Schools. However, when it ended, the students were able to move on to the 3rd year of secondary education if it existed close to their localities or the family had the resources to send the children to the city, which contradicted the initial intention with which it was created, as high school education was the most theoretical, whose purpose was to continue university studies.

Upper primary education was, according to António Nóvoa (1989, p. xvii, our translation), "[...] one of the most significant legislative measures of the Republic [...]", as it constituted a realisation of a "[...] active school, offering comprehensive education, culture and professional pre-learning work" (Adolfo Lima, 1926 apud Nóvoa, 1989, p. xvii, our translation). According to Cândida Proença (1997, p. 137, our translation), "[...] Upper Primary Schools constituted a pedagogically advanced initiative towards an effective democratisation of education". This is a similar view to that previously expressed by Luiza Cortesão (1982, p. 17, our translation), for whom upper primary education was intended "[...] for popular education and [allowed] access to the 2nd cycle of Secondary Education and Normal Schools".

Despite the very meritorious intention, these schools had a very 'troubled' existence (Nóvoa, 1989; Proença, 1997) for three reasons: firstly, this level of education was only achieved after the 1919 Reform, by the determination of Leonardo Coimbra (Decrees no. 5787-A, 5787-B, 1919)⁴, and in a very restricted way: 52 schools, with a maximum annual attendance of 3500 students (Nóvoa, 1989); secondly, upper primary education was a type of education that was much contested by primary teachers and their union organisation, who felt 'expelled' from an education that they considered to belong to Primary, and whose places were taken by teachers from technical schools and high schools (Felgueiras, 2008); thirdly, these schools had already been abolished in the First Republic, in January 1924, by António Sérgio (Decree No. 9354, 1924), although his intention was, according to Rogério Fernandes (1979), to study the reform of these schools and implement it in the 1924-1925 school year. The fact is that these schools reopened in December of that same year, with minister António Joaquim de Sousa Júnior (Decree No. 10397, 1924), the third to succeed António Sérgio, in a period of just one year. Although in both periods several problems were recognised in the functioning of this level of education, namely facilities, pedagogical and administrative, it seems certain that the intentions were not coincident (as can be seen through a comparison of the decrees of extinction by the First Republic and the National Dictatorship).

The disappearance of upper primary education gives rise to a reformulation of primary education, returning to the pre-1919 model, although with some survival of upper primary. The first reform of primary education, legislated by the dictatorship in May 1927, once again divided primary education into elementary (lasting four years, mandatory) and complementary (lasting two years) education⁵. As Salvado Sampaio (1976, p. 9, our translation) states, "[...] complementary primary education maintains affinities with upper primary education, extinguished by Decree No. 11730, of June 15, 1926". Very significant is the fact that, with that decree of May 1927, the Dictatorship reduced the duration of primary education by two years: one year in elementary primary education – and, therefore, one less year of compulsory schooling (from five to four) – and one year in complementary primary. This complementary primary education would end up being extinguished five years later (Decree No. 21712, 1932), with very insignificant numbers. At the time, there were only five complementary schools, which, together, hardly had a total of 150 students each year⁶. The

² Ministry of Public Instruction, Article 7 of Decree No. 5787-B, of May 10, 1919.

³ Rómulo de Carvalho (2011) refers, perhaps by typographical typo, to Upper Normal Schools, which is wrong.

⁴ Regulate upper primary schools, both from May 10, 1919.

⁵ Ministry of Public Instruction, Article 1 of Decree No. 13619 (1927).

⁶ Ministry of Public Instruction, Preamble of Decree No. 21712 (1932).

country had to wait until 1967 for preparatory education, which fulfilled “[...] some of the programmatic intentions of upper primary education” (Nóvoa, 2005, p. 85, our translation).

The reduction will prove to be programmatic for the regime, both in terms of the duration of compulsory education and elementary primary education programs. With regard to the reduction of primary education programs, the preambles of successive decrees are eloquent, which make the objective of simplifying learning to ‘reading, writing and counting’ framed by a moral and political indoctrination of formatting consciences. Let’s look at three examples.

In the Commission’s Report of October 1927, one begins to perceive the intention of reducing to a minimum the knowledge to be promoted among the popular classes: “The subject matter of the new programs is not exorbitant, it does not transpose that limit of minimum knowledge which, in these times, it is necessary to give it to the children of the popular classes, of the humblest classes” (Decree no. 14417, 1927, p. 1967-1968, our translation).

In October 1928, a new Commission made even more explicit its aim of “[...] contributing, through simplified programs, to the great task of extinguishing national illiteracy” (Decree no. 16077, 1928, p. 2211, our translation):

It would be very desirable if we could expand the minimum knowledge to be acquired in primary schools, but it seems to us that it is a regrettable defect, in an otherwise noble intention, to demand more than is compatible with their resources and conditions. Little and good – is our motto (Decree no. 16077, 1928, p. 2211, our translation).

This ‘little and good’ comprised Mother Tongue – reading and writing (the latter being described as ‘writing what one reads’) –, ‘essentially practical’ Arithmetic, as well as the basics of Moral and Civic Education. The objective was therefore ‘indoctrination’, since, it was said, “Disciplining consciences, forming character, is one of the most beautiful works of primary school” (Decree no. 16077, 1928, p. 2211, our translation).

The following year, “[...] another step was taken on the path of simplifications [...]” of primary education programs, assuming itself as “[...] properly elementary education – reading, writing and count correctly” (Decree no. 16730, 1929, p. 896, our translation)⁷. The first three grades were now considered elementary education and the 4th grade was considered complementary education. In 1930, this division was reinforced and redesignated: the first three grades became part of the first level of primary education and the 4th grade became the second level (Decree No. 18140, 1930). More important is the fact that only the first level is mandatory (Article 2). Compulsory schooling soon had a duration of two years shorter than that established in the First Republic. It should be noted that it would only increase again to four years in 1956, for boys⁸, and 1960, for girls⁹.

Throughout this period, there are countless examples of complimentary remarks in relation to illiteracy, which appeared associated with ‘virtues’ such as obedience and resignation, as well as the fear that learning to read would give access to subversive readings, deviating from good character the Portuguese people (Carvalho, 2011; Mónica, 1978; Sampaio, 1976). Its authors are writers and historians, such as Virgínia de Castro Almeida, João Ameal, Alfredo Pimenta, as well as Oliveira Salazar himself.

Still, it becomes obvious to the regime that the school can be an extraordinary vehicle for propaganda and indoctrination. In fact, throughout the Dictatorship, the percentage of children who did not attend primary education decreased significantly: it was 79.4% in 1911, reduced to 73.1% in 1930, 46.2% in 1940, 20.3%, in 1950, and 1%, in 1955 (Carvalho, 2011). This process caused a change in the way people learned to read and write: if, until 1940, literacy was mainly functional and informal, from the 1940s onwards, schooling meant that “[...] younger ages [become] substantially more literate than older ones” (Candeias, Paz, & Rocha, 2007, p. 43, our translation).

It is important to highlight, however, that, in 1955, the pass rate for 3rd and 4th grade exams, both for children and adults (with equivalent values), was around 30% (Decree-Law No. 40964, 1956). Even after that, in 1961, for example, the real enrollment rate at the level of the 2nd level of primary education (4th grade) was, according to PORDATA (2022), 7.5%, that is, the overwhelming majority of children did not pursue studies beyond the 1st grade of primary education – which they attended, but which, in general, they did not complete successfully.

⁷ Ministry of Public Instruction, Commission Report.

⁸ Ministry of Public Instruction, Decree-Law No. 40964 (1956, Article 1).

⁹ Ministry of Public Instruction, Decree-Law No. 42994 (1960, Articles 1 and 2).

Salazar had not deviated from what was his intention in 1933: “I consider [...] the constitution of vast *elites* more urgent than teaching the people to read. The big national problems have to be solved, not by the people, but by the *elites* framing the masses” (Salazar, 1933 apud Mónica, 1978, p. 325, emphasis in the original, our translation).

The Dictatorship, incomplete schools and school posts: the *regentes escolares*

In the period of government instability that occurred between the military coup of 1926 and the referendum on the new constitution in 1933, some separate school administration measures were taken, which sought to break the union, organisation and capacity to claim of primary school teachers, as well as their influence within populations.

During the sixteen years of the Republic, it was never possible to consistently institute the measures that successive Governments and Parliament approved throughout the continental territory. What existed in the five-year primary school, provided for in the Reforms of 1911, 1914 and 1919, was the unfulfilled three or four years of compulsory schooling. Continuing studies also did not require five years of primary education, as one could access high schools or technical schools only with the 4th grade and, later, an entrance exam was also required. The short existence of the co-educational and unified five-year study cycle, decreed by the 1919 reform, had little social impact due to its limited extension to the national territory. Co-education was opposed by many teachers alleging the lack of conditions in the schools, who demonstrated at the Coimbra Congress in 1920, with the government retreating and leaving its implementation to the discretion of the teachers (Felgueiras, 2008). With Decree No. 18140 (1930), by Minister Gustavo Cordeiro Ramos, one of the most Germanophile defenders of the dictatorial regime, schooling was drastically reduced. Under Cordeiro Ramos' government, a set of phrases were published that should appear in teaching manuals and even highlighted and placed in visible places in schools. Compulsory education went from five to three years, with primary education reappearing subdivided into two grades – general and complementary – the latter reduced to one year – the 4th grade (Decree No. 18140, 1930, articles 1 and 2).

In this context, the extinction of mobile schools in 1930 (Decree No. 18819, 1930) – by the same decree that created fixed ‘incomplete schools’ (only the first three grades) in rural locations, where there were thirty children of school age – did nothing more than recognise that compulsory education was not being fulfilled, and ensure that this rudimentary education was in accordance with the regime's guidelines. A new decree, dated December 1930, determines that teachers attached to extinct mobile schools be placed in incomplete schools in the same region in which they previously taught, under appointment by the minister (Decree No. 19118, 1930, Article 40). The chief inspectors of these school regions had to individually indicate the schools, which the teachers had to accept, without the risk of being sanctioned. It also establishes that they could only teach the 1st and 2nd grades. However, some of these teachers could be placed in schools, if necessary and also according to their teaching experience.

In 1931, these incomplete schools were converted into teaching posts (Decree No. 20604, 1931), whose places were filled by attached teachers and ‘*regentes escolares*’. The *regentes* were appointed by the minister, with only “[...] necessary moral and intellectual suitability” being required (Decree No. 20604, 1931, article 3), an ‘easiness’ that was only revised in 1935, when aptitude tests were introduced (Carvalho, 2011; Sampaio, 1976). These teaching agents, almost exclusively women, provided teaching for the first three grades, which were the only mandatory grades. The fourth grade was optional and was, in principle, intended for those who intended to study at technical or high schools. To do this, families would have to look for a school or teacher that would enable the child to take the 4th grade exam. Teaching posts did not fulfill this mission.

The decree is very clear that ‘posts are not schools’. In fact, the school year and its operation differed from primary schools. At the posts, the academic year typically began on November 1st and ended on May 31st for daytime students and ended on March 31st for evening courses. If they operated both day and evening, they would have to have a minimum of fifteen students in daytime (and could be mixed), with three hours of classes a day, and ten students in the evening time, with two hours a day. Below this number, they could not work. In this case, the conductor would receive 350\$00 monthly; if they only worked during the day, they would receive 250\$00 and only at night they would receive 150\$00. Evening courses could only be male or female. The *regentes* were only paid during the months they taught and the budget for these teaching posts was included in the budget of the incomplete schools.

Incomplete schools, and subsequently teaching posts, later school posts, accompanied the end of mobile schools (Nóvoa, 1997), which they intended to replace. In Decree No. 20604 (1931), it is stated to take

advantage of the experience of mobile schools, which are criticised for not being able to verify the professional skills needed to govern them, competing with fixed schools – and some of them had become that way. There is a clear mystification here, as teaching posts did not require any professional skills and some primary school teachers taught evening courses at mobile schools, referring to this as being already fixed and competing with official education. In its preamble, the Decree stated that the teaching posts were intended for the most isolated rural villages, where it was difficult to find conditions to install a teacher, due to lack of housing, teachers and even a place for the school to operate. The teaching post could not be installed in a village where there was already a permanent school, nor within two kilometers of it, as it was within the inclusion radius of the school's children. However, there is a certain distance from official justification to actual practice.

Around 70% of the country during this period was essentially rural, living on subsistence agriculture, in which wine, olive oil, cork and livestock stood out, as products that were destined for the domestic and foreign markets, in addition to the mining and fishing activities, to which the canning industry was linked. “The relative increase in the industrial active population (extractive and manufacturing industries, transport and energy) between 1930 and 1950 (from 21.8% to 27.8%) seems to confirm this reality” (Rosas, 1994, p. 876, our translation). According to Russo (2014, p. 3),

The only cities with more than 100 thousand inhabitants were Lisbon and Porto. In addition to them, the 1930 census considered the existence of another 38 cities, of which only 17 had more than 10 thousand inhabitants, that is, of the housing centres elevated to the category of city, more than half had a population index far below that of the large city centres.

The timid industrialisation process launched in the 1930s, as a response to the great economic depression of 1929, caused a large mass of workers to flock to urban centres, which were still small in size, in search of a better life. In the peripheral neighborhoods of the cities or on the 'islands' of Porto, sanitary and living conditions were terrible, desolate, where families lived crowded together in unhealthy places and children were abandoned on the street, while their father and mother worked. There were neither schools nor teachers for all these children. There was a school in nearby rented houses, where *regentes escolares* were placed as a priority. We can say, without escaping the reality of the facts and statistics, that *regentes* concentrated in the most isolated villages and on the poor outskirts of cities. It was not just a measure aimed at the rural world, as had been announced. According to Salvado Sampaio (1978), in 1954-55, there were 6243 *regentes escolares* out of 20001 official primary education teachers. In relative terms, they were 22% of the total number of teachers in 1940-41, 31% in 1954-55, 20% in 1962-63 and 10% in 1969-70 – our calculations based on statistics consulted in Sampaio (1976, 1977). The percentage decreased from the mid-1950s onwards, but, significantly, they lasted until the 1970s. They were chosen and destined for the minimalist education of children from the poorest and most fragile sections of society and took the place of teachers.

In November 1936, 'school posts' were established (Decree No. 27279, 1936), absorbing the previous teaching posts. The 'school posts' are defined as 'embryonic forms of the elementary school', the 'snug school of the small land'. There must be a minimum of thirty children, the school year would be the same length as other schools, the same book and program, but handed over to *regentes escolares*. These were required to pass a teaching competence exam. With the institutionalisation of this professional figure, the State will backtrack on the qualifications needed to teach, since, initially, these people were not even required to have the fourth grade of primary education as a qualification (Sampaio, 1978). From 1935 onwards, they were subjected to an examination in which several were excluded. For their appointment, political trust and good moral behavior continued to be indispensable requirements. With this measure, the State established a gap between teachers graduated from normal schools and popular ones with rudiments of literacy, generating competition for placement in teaching, since a school could be closed to make way for a teaching post, occupied by a *regente*, at a time when there were unemployed teachers (Felgueiras, 2008, 2011).

Furthermore, primary school teachers were curtailed in their rights as citizens and professionals, at the same time that the *regentes* constituted a kind of reserve army to replace them, at the slightest sign of non-conformity with the regime, in addition to the prior censorship to which any type of publication was subject, since the military coup of 1926, and the persecution of the union leaders of the Primary Teachers' Union, at the end of 1927, with the cancellation of its facilities. Initially, the Union turned to the courts, saw its colleagues released and its facilities were restored, with only its significant monetary fund disappearing. However, in 1930, teachers' associations were regulated (Decree No. 17983, 1930). This regulation, which greatly limited freedom of association and expression, was the subjugation of associations to power. The

Teachers' Union still tried to react, rallying around the creation of the Teachers' House, but, in 1933, with the National Labor Statute (Decree no. 23084, 1933), public employees were prohibited from forming unions. At that time, the Union of Official Primary Teachers, considering that it was unable to carry out its functions with dignity and represent its members, dissolved itself.

Regentes escolares at the beginning were generally people with the 3rd or 4th grade and their role was to teach children literacy, so that they could obtain a 3rd grade diploma. They had a salary that was only 50% of a teacher's salary, which represented a significant saving for the public coffers. At the same time, they constituted a reserve army, which threatened any possible teachers' claim.

On November 23, 1935, Decree No. 26115 (1935) established a reduction in the salaries of primary teachers and the end of the house rent allowance and the residence allowance, which were granted to those who lived in the 1st category municipal seats. Whoever lived in the residence, which school buildings as the Conde Ferreira or Adões Bermudes type had, had to start paying rent to the municipalities. Career progression was made more difficult with the reduction from four to three seniority periods, which went from five to ten years each. According to Salvado Sampaio (1978), the salary of primary teachers goes from index 100 to index 63. On the other hand, high school teachers see their salaries increased, with the justification that it is necessary to increase salary differentiation according to the qualifications, responsibilities and social status. Primary teachers' living and working conditions were extremely difficult, as they had to move around the country with their families, depending on where they were placed. The difficulty in finding a house in the villages was real and the source of supply was the local markets, with varying frequency, between a week and fifteen days. This difficulty in having access to supplies, when the teacher was from far away, meant that the population presented them with food, particularly vegetables, sent by the children.

The repression extended to the whole country, but this professional sector was highly monitored, either by the dictatorship's henchmen or by petty interests, between groups in the villages themselves, who sometimes accused teachers of unfounded actions or intentions, as a way to remove them from school and place a family member there, naturally presented as more honest and affectionate to the regime¹⁰. *Regentes escolares* were also not protected from these dangers. However, they appeared objectively and subjectively as a threat to primary teachers. Over time, until the 1970s, if the training of teachers was poor, the *regentes'* literacy would have evolved a little, in some cases, but it always remained at a very basic level. The source of training and professional guidance was provided remotely, through the *Boletim Oficial Escola Portuguesa*, which replaced the multiple teacher magazines, which were banned¹¹. Paulo Guinote (2006) refers to the existence, in the 1950s, of small books with didactic guidelines and lesson plans aimed at *regentes escolares*.

In 1964/65, there were still 4223 *regentes escolares* spread across the country, out of 21849 teachers (Coelho, 1969). It should be noted that, in the same year, there were 38,5% of female aggregate teachers, who, like the *regentes*, were not paid in August and September (Coelho, 1969).

Beyond rural and urban: *regentes escolares* as teachers of the impoverished population

The measures taken by successive ministers of Public Instruction between 1926 and 1933 were isolated, sometimes contradictory, with the next minister undoing the decisions taken months earlier by his predecessor, expressing government instability, tensions between the groups that came to power and without clear guidance about education. However, when closely analysing the measures taken, all researchers agree that there is a common link to all of them: dismantling the democratic and republican school, reducing primary education for the entire Portuguese population to a minimum, limiting education to not open horizons in the sense that populations seek social advancement, which would free them from rural servitude work, and prevents workers from coming into contact with ideas considered subversive. Regarding primary teachers, living conditions worsened, and surveillance was tightened. Pedagogical magazines were banned or silenced. Teacher meetings (pedagogical conferences) were only held if called by a hierarchical superior who determined topics and who could deal with them, and there was generally no room for debate. The aim was to instil the fundamental axes of the new regime's ideology. This appears quite evident in the 1929 reform of primary education programs (Decree No. 16730, 1929). However, Pereira (2017, p. 47, our translation) states, for example, that already in 1928 it was determined that in primary schools the teaching of the colonies and

¹⁰ About the living conditions of primary school teachers during the Dictatorship, see Felgueiras (2008, 2011) and Adão (1984).

¹¹ The *Escola Portuguesa* was created by the Decree No. 22369 (1933). See, on this topic, Pereira (2017).

the apology of the colonial empire would be reinforced, “[...] to awaken the students for the ‘civilising mission’ of the Portuguese and the need to defend Portuguese space”. In the competition regulations to choose the book for high schools in April 1931 (Decree No. 19605, 1931), some doubts arose about article 13, which refers to ‘exactness in doctrines’. The minister clarified them a year later through a new decree, stating that Portuguese history compendia must

[...] contribute to students learning in its pages to feel that Portugal is the most beautiful, noble, and valuable of the Homelands, that the Portuguese cannot have any other feeling other than that of Portugal above all (Decree No. 21103, 1932).

Cordeiro Ramos publishes a set of sentences that must appear in Portuguese school books (Decree No. 21014, 1932) and even be highlighted in the classrooms or corridors of schools, both primary, high and technical schools (Decree No. 22040, 1932). Through them, an attempt was made to instil a set of ideas that constituted the ideological framework of the regime: authority, firmness, obedience, and how this constituted a learning process for autonomy for the exercise of power. We highlight here just some of the sixteen phrases legislated for the 4th grade: ‘Obey and you will know how to command’; ‘Honor in everything and for everything your Father and your Mother’; ‘In the family, the head is the Father, in school the head is the Master, in the State the head is the Government’; ‘To command is not to enslave: it is to direct. The easier obedience is, the softer the command is’ (Decree No. 21014, 1932). They praise the family and women in the home and present social hierarchy by extrapolating family relationships of a patriarchal type.

In the sentences for technical school books, in addition to praising work and the worker as an artist, the interest in drawing and manual development, appreciation for manual work and the importance of obeying are mentioned. These sentences aim at the contentment of being a worker and the demobilisation of expectations of social advancement.

It can be said that from 1935 onwards, the orientation was more explicit regarding primary education. However, the structuring lines of the educational ideology to be followed had been drawn up since 1928. In 1936, the Primary Teaching Schools and kindergartens, which were under the responsibility of the State or Municipalities, were closed. Above all, it was stressed the need to create a national pedagogy, in accordance with the aspirations and needs of the Portuguese people. In 1938, crucifixes were placed in all schools in the country, and the ceremony was widely reported in *Escola Portuguesa*.

With the closing of enrollments in Teaching Schools in November 1936, it was not long before a general lack of teachers was felt, even though *regentes escolares* were used to replace aggregate teachers. In 1940, hiring was established on an emergency basis for those who had completed the second cycle of high school or a previous general course at high school or the women's training course at technical schools. These teachers, admitted through public tests, completed a year of internship and state exam and could be placed anywhere where there was a vacancy in teaching or the creation of new schools as aggregate teachers. Among their colleagues, they were designated as ‘parachute teachers’, as they did not have pedagogical qualifications to practice the profession. It was yet another element of devaluation of the teaching profession. The short training they received consisted of teaching for a year, supervised by an in-service teacher. Under these conditions, there was no room for debate or dissemination of contributions from pedagogical sciences, nor were innovations or pedagogical experiments supported. National pedagogy was defined by nationalist, colonialist conservatism, Catholic moralism and a minimalist curriculum for school education and teacher training.

If working and living conditions were extremely difficult for teachers, as is widely documented (Adão, 1984; Araújo, 2000; Mónica, 1977; Nóvoa, 1997, 2005; Sampaio, 1976, 1977, 1978; Felgueiras, 1998, 2008, 2011), it is easy to imagine how difficult they were for the *regentes*, who initially did not receive a salary, but a monthly subsidy, about half of a teacher's salary and later did not receive it during vacations. However, *regentes* would have the advantage of initially being people from the communities, not having to travel and having some family support.

But how can we then understand the attraction to this work on the part of *regentes escolares*? Among the explanatory factors are the lack of qualified work opportunities outside the domestic space for women; the possibility of harmonising family life with professional life; being considered a female job, since educating children was a continuation of domestic care for children, and being safe for a woman or young woman, insofar as the supervisory authority exercised by men was relatively distant. Furthermore, as humble state employees, they held a status of respect, despite the poverty in which many lived. In the rural and even suburban world, being able to count on a monthly salary was an element of family stability. Perhaps because

of all this, women continued to be a silent army of a few thousand *regentes escolares*, dedicated to the literacy of poor children, whether in the most isolated rural areas or the suburbs of cities. As Justino de Magalhães (2018, p. 279, our translation) states, the “[...] distinction between urban and rural was accentuated by the lack of opportunity, the difficulty of access, but not necessarily the devaluation of school training”.

The school of the Dictatorship was one – although it cannot be confused with the different meaning of the ‘single school’ of the First Republic –, centralised, minimalist and uniform for the entire population: minimum learning programs, condensed from 1940 onwards in single books, standard to the entire continental and island territory, depending on centralised guidelines supervised by school inspectors. Even private and domestic school students had to take public school exams.

The differences in teaching in public schools, when they existed, were reflected in the quality and conservation of school buildings, in the certified quality of the teaching staff by the diploma of training schools (Normal Schools, later known as Primary Teaching Schools), greater diversity of material school: maps of Portugal and various colonies, geometric metric boxes no. 1 and 2, wall charts for the study of science and the social environment, such as traffic signs and some hygiene rules. Later, in the 1960s, in cities, one could sporadically find slides or even small films from literacy campaigns, which were rarely used. Everything suggests that these schools served as application schools, where normalists conducted pedagogical practice activities. It should be noted that, even in the central areas of cities like Porto, until the end of the 1980s, many primary schools operated in buildings, which were old houses, rented and adapted to schools, many of them in deplorable conditions.

This situation of a certain abandonment of education is relatively common throughout the country: interior and coastal, rural, urban or fishing areas. It worsened in the interior due to the difficulty of communication routes, the isolation in which the populations lived, and the lack of prospects for improving their lives. In this aspect, the opportunity to be a *regente escolar* was a dignified field of work for the female population.

Regentes escolares only belatedly received the attention of historians regarding their specific living conditions. The lack of teaching qualifications, conformity and support for the regime, and the fact that teachers see them as opponents, who could take their places, meant that they were ignored as a socio-professional group. In turn, the need to understand the atavistic and conformist mentality of sectors of the population, and the role and meaning that the teaching and educational reforms of the Dictatorship had at all levels, implied a critical revisiting of the forms of social reproduction. Democracy awakened interest in knowledge of Portuguese education, whose historiography had been practically prevented from being done. Considerable studies were carried out regarding the number, quality, and variety of themes and approaches, followed by a particularly interested readership – teachers and educators. The vision of a more interdisciplinary historiography of education, in which the social matrix intersects with the cultural and ethnographic, is more recent and has led to addressing themes kept in the shadow of research concerns, seeking to unveil ways of life of subordinate or maintained groups on the margins: children at risk, women, institutions, popular and informal education and even private education. It is a whole universe of themes and problems to which current historiography has progressively turned. In this context, the problem of *regentes escolares* emerged as subordinate educators, socially and professionally devalued. The works of Ana Paula Rias (1997, 1999), Pedro Gomes and Matilde Machado (2021) shed new light on *regentes escolares* and Paulo Guinote (2006) proposed another interpretative reading of this reality.

For Guinote (2006), creating school posts and *regentes escolares* would be a continuation of the First Republic's policy for the literacy of rural populations, by institutionalising mobile schools, created in the previous period, within the republican movement. The author further argues that these measures mean the victory of pragmatism, given the republican inability to implement the outlined policies for developing the primary education system and combating illiteracy. According to Guinote (2006), without *regentes escolares*, it would not have been possible to achieve mass education in Portugal, as there would be a lack of qualified teachers.

Accepting the creation of *regentes escolares* as an act of financial and political pragmatism, recalling ways of resolving illiteracy in other countries, as a way of spreading the regime's ideology among the popular classes and stopping illiteracy, which not only embarrassed but made the industry take-off, this option cannot be confused with a continuation of mobile schools, which have since been closed. The level of education of those who taught in mobile schools was incomparably different from that of *regentes escolares* (Santos, Rocha, & Felgueiras, 2012) and they aimed for students to obtain the 4th grade. The problem with those schools was having a republican vision of education. If some *regentes*, in a later period, already had average educational

qualifications, this was not a characteristic of the professional group in general, nor what was required or expected of them. Furthermore, in the 20s of the 20th century, there was a movement of unemployed teachers, well documented in the pedagogical press of the Republic, who demanded the need to build decent school buildings and have priority to teach in Mobile Schools. Unemployment was due to the non-opening of places and the lack of school buildings, which did not keep up with the limited number of graduates. A contradiction that the Republic did not resolve, and the Dictatorship will worsen with repressive measures on teachers, the devaluation of their salaries, the freezing of all innovation and pedagogical debate and, finally, the closure of Primary Teaching Schools. If the teachers were insufficient later, those policies proved extremely negative for the country's needs. However, and this is a fact little mentioned in Portuguese historiography, in the period corresponding to the closure of enrollment in Primary Teaching Schools – 1936 to 1942 – private schools continued to operate, and teachers were trained to take the state exam in official schools of the Primary Teaching.

Ana Paula Rias paints a portrait of the *regentes*' daily lives that is very expressive and, in many ways, similar to those of teachers in rural areas. She highlights their insecurity of placement, what happened to the aggregate teachers, the economic difficulties, the lack of preparation and the mistreatment of students. She compiled important sources about these, revealing one of the causes of school dropout, about which there are few studies. The mistreatment inflicted on children by male and female teachers has only recently received the attention of historiography (Amorim & Aires, 2013; Basto, 2011, 2012) and is in line with what has been revealed about *regentes escolares*, which is why we must also consider the fear of school as an explanatory element of school dropout and failure in this period. We can consider that violence, humiliation and fear were underlying the behaviour and ways of acting socially, whether in families or public places and on the part of authorities, which neither the training of teachers nor the supposed moral qualities of the *regentes* could resist. Without disregarding the importance of these professionals for the extension of compulsory education, it does not seem legitimate to say that this extension would not have been possible without them, as teachers moved around the country for many years, teaching in isolated locations, in equally extremely precarious material conditions. It was a clear political and ideological choice, not an inexorable imposition of social life. Also Gomes and Machado (2021), when comparing the results in 3rd grade exams in school posts and primary schools, point out the worst results in school posts.

However, at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, the economic, political, social and international situation changed and there was an attempt to democratise access to education. We cannot dwell here on characterising this context, in which the colonial war played an important role, along with integration into the OECD, of which Portugal was a founding country. According to Decree-Law No. 67/73 (1973)¹², primary education school posts were abolished and replaced by primary schools. The same diploma determined that *regentes escolares*, permanent and aggregate, were placed in schools, in vacant places or places whose holders were temporarily unable to attend, as long as it was not possible to ensure teaching by teachers. In accordance with Article 3, an intensive course was established in Primary Teaching Schools to enable entry into the primary teaching course for *regentes escolares*, permanent or aggregate, who did not have the required qualifications. The admission and attendance conditions, as well as the course plan, were regulated by Ordinance No. 140/73 (1973). The intensive course would operate in Primary Teaching Schools, aiming to enable *regentes escolares* who did not have qualifications for this admission to enter the general course. It would last three years. The course's study plan consisted of Portuguese Language, General and National History, General and Portuguese Geography, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, and a foreign language. The ordinance also determined that *regentes escolares* who attended the course must attend four practical classes weekly in the application schools attached to the Primary Teaching Schools. As expected, the course was not accepted, as it did not create feasible attendance conditions for *regentes escolares*. With the 1974 Revolution, educational policy underwent significant changes.

In 1976, there was a new change. Intensive courses, created by Decree-Law No. 111/76 (1976), responded to the need to define the situation of teachers in primary education and school posts, as well as staff and education services of former colonies. The set of measures, in addition to protecting the aforementioned interests, was intended to represent the professional development of the class of *regentes escolares* and teachers coming from former colonies through pedagogical development and training to be obtained in the

¹² Ministry of National Education. *Diário do Governo* No. 48/1973, Series I of 1973-02-26, Article 1 of the Decree.

new special courses, which the new legislation regulated. Given the personal difficulties, age and lack of basic training on the part of *regentes escolares* in obtaining the training above, they were allowed to carry out non-teaching roles and even be integrated into positions within the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research (the new name of the former Ministry of National Education) and services and establishments dependent on it.

Final remarks

Even though school posts were more widespread in the interior and south of the country, it cannot be ignored that they were recurrent in the suburbs of cities, even in Porto, albeit on a smaller scale. This leads us to conclude that *regentes escolares* were designed and used as the most economical means of educating the most disadvantaged populations – due to isolation and poverty – in order to stop their dreams of any improvement in their lives. It was a minimum literacy level for poor children, who would learn enough to write a letter, sign their name, learn the catechism and do math. They were prepared to listen to the priest's sermon on Sundays, work from sunrise to sunset – during the day, as maids or as clerks – with no other ambitions than to have 'four whitewashed walls' and 'bread and wine on the table'. However, the population began to feel the importance of reading and writing and demanded schools, if only for the dream, not always golden, of emigration.

The new national and international sociopolitical situation, in which the colonial war and mass emigration were decisive, led the country to Democracy. In addition to Democratisation and Decolonisation, Development was one of the fundamental elements that fulfilled the Armed Forces Program, which freed the country from the Dictatorship. In the new context, education was a key element. It was with Democracy that the end of school posts and the integration of *regentes* into the ministry's staff could be achieved, for services in which they could be helpful and necessary. At the same time, training was facilitated for those who felt they had an aptitude for teaching and wanted to enhance it, with the means created for this purpose. After all, they had been the most exploited public service sector during the Dictatorship.

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