

THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION THROUGH HISPANIC–BRAZILIAN DIALOGUE:

Interview with Agustín Escolano Benito

João Paulo Gama Oliveira^{1*}, Vania Grim Thies²

¹Universidade Federal de Sergipe, São Cristóvão, SE, Brasil. ²Universidade Federal de Pelotas, Pelotas, RS, Brasil. *Corresponding author. E-mail: profjoaopaulogama@gmail.com.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEW

The dialogue with Agustín Benito Escolano began in the first decade of the 2000s through readings undertaken at different stages of our academic education. Over time, this academic interaction gradually expanded: first through email exchanges with the researcher, then through additional telephone conversations, until we crossed the Atlantic to carry out research stays at the Centro Internacional de la Cultura Escolar (CEINCE)¹, located in the historic and welcoming town of Berlanga de Duero, Spain.

In 2018, Vania Grim Thies experienced this academic journey. In 2025, with her support, João Paulo Gama² was likewise able to conduct research and deepen his learning during a residency in a space that radiates historical-educational knowledge: CEINCE. Since then, the exchanges have gained greater consistency, and the desire to systematize these intellectual relationships continued to grow. At the 30th ASPHE Meeting in 2025³, the idea emerged to conduct the present interview, carried out by both Brazilian researchers.

The interview was organized via email between December 2024 and January 2025. Through successive exchanges—always guided by respect for the meticulous scholarship of the Spanish historian—we arrived at this interview, in which Agustín Escolano Benito addresses the beginnings of his research, his most recent work, the concept of educational heritage, the relations established between Spain and Brazil in the early decades of the twenty-first century through CEINCE, and an invitation to continue strengthening dialogue among Brazil, Spain, and other European countries.

¹ For further information on CEINCE, readers are encouraged to consult the institution's website at www.ceince.eu, as well as Agustín Escolano Benito's own text on the Center (Benito, 2018).

² This was a research mission abroad supported by CALL No. 05/2024/PPGED/PROAP/UFS.

³ The Rio Grande do Sul Association of Researchers in the History of Education (ASPHE), founded in 1995, was the first association of researchers in the History of Education established in Brazil. The 30th ASPHE Meeting took place on October 1, 2, and 3 at the Federal University of Pelotas, in the city of Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

Founder and Director of the Centro Internacional de la Cultura Escolar (CEINCE), located in Berlanga del Duero, Spain. He served as Full Professor of History of Education at the University of Valladolid, Spain. He was also Full Professor at the University of Salamanca, where he founded the *Revista Interuniversitaria de Historia de la Educación*. He served as President of the Sociedad Española de Historia de la Educación and as a member of the Executive Committee of the International Standing Conference for the History of Education (ISCHE). He is a member of the Soci t  Europ enne de Culture (Italy).

He holds honorary doctorates from the University of Lisbon (Portugal) and from the Colegio de Doctores de Salamanca (Spain), and has been a visiting professor at the Italian universities of Macerata, Ferrara, and Bologna. He is frequently invited to deliver lectures and to serve on master’s and doctoral examination committees, particularly in connection with academic partnerships established with Brazilian scholars.

His works and publications are widely referenced in memory centers, school museums, and other research initiatives in the field of the History of Education in Brazil. His current research focuses on school culture and educational historical heritage.

INTERVIEW

J.P.G.O y V.G.T. – Jo o Paulo Gama Oliveira y Vania Grim Thies

A.E.B. – Agust n Benito Escolano

J.P.G.O y V.G.T. *Your established trajectory in the History of Education is extensive and has had repercussions in different parts of the world. How do you reflect upon your entry into the field of the History of Education and the research objects you selected throughout this process?*

A.E.B. My interest in the history of education began during my university studies at the Complutense University of Madrid, in the 1960s, when I came to understand that both education as a social fact and the pedagogical disciplines devoted to understanding, explaining, and regulating it are historical-cultural constructions. I also realized that the academic status of the disciplines and faculties concerned with analyzing the phenomenology of educational realities

is shaped by temporal processes of value attribution that codify the knowledge informing educational action and reflection.

During those formative years, which culminated in the completion of my doctoral degree, I immersed myself in classical and modern scholarship and entered the world of archives, libraries, and museums. At that time, I experienced what I would describe as a cognitive shift, which led me to question the alienation underlying the traditional episteme of pedagogical historiography—often anchored in the interrelation between the world of ideas and ideological superstructures—while underestimating educational practices as the locus in which reality and lived experience are concretely manifested.

The debates surrounding the “new history” of intellectuals, led by the well-known French Annales School, already encouraged us—as Lucien Febvre suggested—to abandon the “useless tournament of ideas” and to transcend pseudo-emancipatory ideological analyses which, as the philosopher Henri Bergson warned, hovered above reality without truly grasping or interpreting it in its empirical dimension, in its economic and social contexts, or within the existential structures of the lifeworld explored by emerging phenomenology.

For these reasons, my doctoral dissertation, intellectually moving beyond that neo-idealist episteme, focused on examining the interactions between economic transformations and Enlightenment thought during the crisis of the Ancien Régime at the end of the eighteenth century and the take-off of the Industrial Revolution, as well as on analyzing their impact on the emergence of modern technical education, which replaced the guild-based structures characteristic of the traditional world of professions.

J.P.G.O y V.G.T. *For decades, your relationships with scholars in the History of Education in Brazil have been established and consolidated. If you were to construct a timeline of these paths—highlighting periods, researchers, institutions, and partnerships—what would it look like?*

A.E.B. Over the past two decades, Brazil has been an essential reference for us in mapping the new history of education. I recall that one of the first visits⁴ to CEINCE was made by a group of women activists from the Landless

⁴ According to information provided by the interviewee, between 2003 and 2025, CEINCE hosted 1,087 researchers from different countries and working on diverse research topics. Of these, 159 were researchers from Brazil

Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra – MST)⁵. More recently, I should also note that my two most recent books were published in Brazil even before their release in Spanish. Both in terms of thematic focus and methodological approaches, CEINCE collaborators have learned to view historical experience through renewed sensibilities and equally innovative perspectives.

It would be highly valuable to conduct a thematic analysis of the more than one thousand research residencies carried out at CEINCE over the past quarter century. This period, of medium-term duration, reflects the openness of our discipline to new questions and approaches and has had a significant impact on the internationalization of historical-educational studies. Such an analysis would make it possible to identify thematic trends, the geographical distribution of these currents, the institutions that contributed to the formation of historiographical networks, and other variables relevant to the history of science.

In our relations with Brazil, I must emphasize the important role played by several colleagues from that esteemed country. Some years ago, I established contact with Brazilian scholars such as Professors Heloísa Pimenta Rocha, from the University of Campinas (UNICAMP), and Vera Lucia Gaspar da Silva, from the State University of Santa Catarina (UDESC). I am deeply grateful to them for the hermeneutic effort involved in translating my works on the school as culture and on the historical construction of emotional education. We also engaged in discussions on topics that remain open for further inquiry, including material culture, textbook studies, hygiene, the teaching profession, and other themes related to the empirical culture of the school from a comparative historical perspective.

As can be observed in the residency records, Brazil is the country most frequently represented at our center, fostering scholarly exchanges, institutional agreements, Ibero-American events, and academic connections between the Americas and Europe. From Maranhão to São Paulo, Campinas, and Paraná; from Rio de Janeiro to the Regional University of the Northwest of the State of Rio Grande do Sul (UNIJUÍ), Caxias do Sul, Uberlândia, Pelotas, Maringá, and Sergipe—I mention what I can recall, and I may inadvertently omit some references. Nevertheless, I can affirm that, for over a quarter of a

⁵ For further information, see: <https://mst.org.br/>

century, numerous Brazilian colleagues and institutions have shaped a sustained and influential framework of dialogue that has stimulated new international approaches to the history of education.

J.P.G.O y V.G.T. *As coordinators of memory centers in Brazil—the Center for Education and Memory of Atheneu Sergipense (CEMAS) and the History of Literacy, Reading, Writing, and School Textbooks (HISALES)—we find the work of CEINCE truly inspiring. What are the main challenges, contributions, and future perspectives of CEINCE?*

A.E.B. It is encouraging to know that CEINCE functions as a kind of crucible or laboratory in which these interactions are forged, united by a shared commitment to a renewed history of school culture, aligned with the broader intellectual framework that is today referred to as the history of experience. I believe that a significant convergence has emerged between the scholarly communities of our two countries, and that this interrelationship is radiating diverse and far-reaching influences to other academic centers across the Americas and Europe.

At present, we face a common challenge: the construction of more solid and stable academic agreements grounded in shared objectives, in line with what has increasingly been termed the public history of education. This approach responds to social expectations concerning the development of a comparative educational historiography. Beyond established historiographical traditions and the corporate interests of academic groups within particular countries, the history of education must engage with the questions that arise in society, including pragmatic concerns related to school reforms and teacher education. In this orientation, CEINCE undoubtedly constitutes—and will continue to constitute—an important space for analysis, debate, and intellectual and social exchange in multinational encounters. Brazil will always be warmly welcomed in these historical-comparative colloquia.

J.P.G.O y V.G.T. *Many of your writings address educational heritage, a field that has expanded significantly in the work of Brazilian scholars, particularly through studies on school material culture. In this regard, how would you define educational heritage, especially in terms of its convergences with and distinctions from school material culture?*

A.E.B. The historical heritage of education functions as a kind of material condenser of the empirical culture of the school and other formative spheres—a mirror through which this culture becomes visible to us and through which the historical reality of pedagogical institutions may be apprehended from a pragmatically oriented perspective.

School objects are, as the Italian semiologist Pier Paolo Sacchetto has suggested, “object-markers”: material signs that reveal much about the past of our educational formation and even about the present condition of schools. This idea is inscribed at the entrance to the gallery dedicated to the material archaeology of education in our pedagogical museum, a space that many Brazilian colleagues have visited and documented.

My most recent book, *Repensar la Cultura Material de la Escuela*, currently being published in Mexico, further develops these reflections and proposes new analytical frameworks for examining the material dimension of schooling through methodological approaches drawn from semiotics, cultural anthropology, ethnology, and other ethnohistorical perspectives.

Complementing the material dimension, one must also consider the iconographic representations of the past and the oral memories of education as lived by historical subjects. All of this constitutes a heritage attributed to the school’s past and to its contribution to the formation of subjectivity and the cultural sociability of individuals and societies.

In our work *A escola como cultura*, published in Brazil some years ago, we analyzed the relations of autonomy, interaction, and convergence that may historically emerge in the construction of the empirical culture (grounded in practices), the theoretical culture (linked to academic knowledge), and the political culture (associated with the norms that regulate educational systems) of school institutions.

In this regard, in my more recent studies I have argued that educational ethnohistory—an approach explicitly connected to the material and immaterial heritage of the school—constitutes a heuristic pathway capable of offering a more faithful understanding of the history of educational experience and of the new intellectual history grounded in phenomenological and hermeneutic foundations. Such an approach may foster the formation of interpretive communities capable of explaining school culture. The ongoing shift in historiographical paradigms has, moreover, contributed to revaluing what is

now termed heritage education within teacher education programs and in the training of other education professionals.

F.S.S e V.K.P. *Antonio Nóvoa wrote a Letter to a Young Historian of Education, offering advice to those beginning in the field. If you were to identify some essential tasks for researchers in the History of Education, what would they be?*

A.E.B. Antonio Nóvoa's letter encouraged young historians to dare to pose new questions to the testimonies of the past, drawing as well on expectations for the future. The fourth gallery of CEINCE's pedagogical museum evokes precisely this kind of association among memory, the present, and the future. To this end, it draws upon a text by Jorge Luis Borges that invites us to "play" with the past as a way of engaging in dialogue with the networked system that surrounds us.

In a video featuring colleagues from several Spanish universities, visitors to the museum are invited to engage with contemporary issues such as the network society, cyberschooling, gender relations, and interculturalism. These interactions encourage past–present associations that connect genealogy to the present moment and to the futures that emerge from it.

Indeed, much like a rear-view mirror in an automobile reminds us not to lose sight of the road behind us, the exhibition invites visitors to keep the past in view—without which it would be impossible to move forward toward new horizons. In this way, those who visit CEINCE's permanent exhibition are encouraged to relate material and immaterial heritage to the future expectations of our societies. Herein lies the key to the future of the history of education and of the history of the school. This, in essence, is one of the central motivations behind what we have referred to as the public history of education.

J.P.G.O y V.G.T. *Agustín Escolano Benito has already produced an extensive body of work, marked by intellectual breadth, theoretical depth, and significant contributions to the field of the History of Education. In this regard, what can we expect from your forthcoming writings? Which themes are likely to be published in the near future?*

A.E.B. At present, I am reexamining the interactions among the empirical cultures of schools from a transnational and comparative perspective, as well as the relationships between schools and new approaches emerging from the humanities and social sciences—and even from philosophy. As the poet

Rainer Maria Rilke observed a century ago, we are born into a world already interpreted, which we must reread and understand in order to situate ourselves within the lifeworld. This reinterpretation is carried out largely through the culture that schools provide over long processes of formation and influence.

It is within the architecture of institutions that our body schema takes shape. School timetables introduce civilizational temporalities that replace the biorhythms of primary familial sociability with socially regulated time. Our ways of reading, writing, calculating, measuring, and interpreting reality are shaped to a great extent by the methods and contents of formal education. Likewise, forms of communication and social interaction are molded by practices fostered through school rhetoric and by the mimetic dynamics of what might be termed the parallel school.

This has been the case since mass schooling—described more than half a century ago by Pedro Rosselló, director of the *Bureau International d'Éducation* (BIE) in Geneva—became universalized and entered the era of mass education. A century ago, such a claim would not have been possible. The generalization of school culture constitutes a sociocultural process of anthropological scope that we, as historians of the school, must investigate and interpret. If we undertake this task through the lens of material and immaterial heritage, public understanding will become more feasible, more realistic, and more inclusive.

Clearly, however, this question would require more than a response within the limits of a questionnaire; it calls for an interdisciplinary and public colloquium, framed within a comparative and international perspective—an invitation that CEINCE continues to extend.

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JOÃO PAULO GAMA OLIVEIRA: PhD and MA in Education and BA in History from UFS. Adjunct Professor at UFS, affiliated with the Department of Education and the Graduate Program in Education. He completed a CNPq-funded postdoctoral fellowship at UNESP. He coordinates CEMAS and leads HESCOLAR/UFS/CNPq. His research focuses on the History of Education, secondary and higher education, Sergipe intellectuals, the teaching profession, educational heritage, and the history of History teaching.

E-mail: profjoaopaulogama@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2195-2145/>

VANIA GRIM THIES: PhD in Education from UFPel and Associate Professor at UFPel, affiliated with the Department of Teaching and the Graduate Program in Education. She completed a postdoctoral fellowship at UDESC. She leads HISALES/CNPq, coordinates the Hisales Memory and Research Center, and serves as President of the Associação Sul-Rio-Grandense de Pesquisadores em História da Educação. Her research addresses the History of Education, educational heritage, written culture, personal archives, and reading and writing practices.

E-mail: vaniagrimg@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6169-067X/>

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Raquel Discini de Campos (UFU)

E-mail: raqueldiscini@uol.com.br

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5031-3054>

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