

Automatic promotion in the 1950s: the pioneering experiment of the Experimental School of Lapa (Sao Paulo)

Lygia S. Viégas

Federal University of Bahia

Marilene P. R. Souza

University of São Paulo

Abstract

This article presents the pioneering project of abolishing failure in the state public schools in São Paulo state, developed in the late 1950 and implemented at the beginning of 1960 on an experimental basis at the Experimental School of Lapa, a school that worked as the official unit of research of the Department of Education. Despite its inaugural nature, such experiment has rarely appeared in publications on the subject and there are few records about it. First, this article outlines a brief historical context of the debate on the so-called automatic promotion, which in Brazil began in 1918, in the context of the First Republic, and strengthened especially in the 1950s, in the developmental period. Then the paper addresses components of the project conducted at the Experimental School of Lapa, justifying the relevance and topicality of automatic promotion. It also outlines its formatting, in particular the organization of classes, the curriculum, assessment and teaching role. After that, some excerpts from statements made by educators involved in the construction of the project are addressed. They reveal the project's strengths and contradictions. Also rare documents are presented on the topic, which were published in the context of such pioneering experiment. At the end, there are considerations regarding the experiment in question, which though little known has enormous historical importance. It is hoped that this article contributes to the construction of high quality public school, especially given the increasing implementation of the policy of cycles in Brazilian public schools.

Keywords

History of education - Educational policies - Automatic promotion.

Contact

Lygia de Sousa Viégas

lyosviegas@gmail.com

Promoção automática nos anos 1950: a experiência pioneira do Grupo Experimental da Lapa (São Paulo)

Lygia S. Viégas
Universidade Federal da Bahia

Marilene P. R. Souza
Universidade de São Paulo

Resumo

O presente artigo visa apresentar o projeto pioneiro de abolição da reprovação na rede estadual paulista, elaborado no final da década de 1950 e implantado no início de 1960, em caráter experimental, no Grupo Experimental da Lapa, escola que funcionava como unidade oficial de pesquisas da Secretaria da Educação. Apesar de inaugural, tal experiência raramente comparece em publicações sobre o tema, havendo poucos registros a seu respeito. Para tanto, o artigo esboça, a princípio, um breve contexto histórico do debate em torno da então chamada promoção automática, que se inicia no Brasil em 1918, no contexto da Primeira República, e ganha força, sobretudo, na década de 1950, no período desenvolvimentista. Em seguida, o texto aborda elementos constitutivos do projeto realizado no Grupo Experimental da Lapa, justificando a pertinência e a atualidade da promoção automática, bem como delineia sua formatação, em especial no que diz respeito à organização das classes, ao currículo, à avaliação e ao papel docente. Posto isso, são revelados trechos de depoimentos dados por educadores envolvidos na construção do referido projeto, os quais revelam suas potencialidades e contradições. Também são apresentados documentos raros sobre o tema publicados no contexto dessa experiência pioneira. Ao final, são tecidas considerações sobre a experiência em questão, a qual, apesar de pouco divulgada, possui enorme importância histórica. Espera-se, com este artigo, contribuir para a construção da escola pública de qualidade, principalmente considerando a crescente implantação da política de ciclos nas redes públicas educacionais brasileiras.

Palavras-chave

História da educação – Políticas educacionais – Promoção automática.

Correspondência:
Lygia de Sousa Viégas
lyosviegas@gmail.com

The origins of automatic promotion in Brazil

Unlike what is often assumed, the idea of abolishing failure in Brazilian schools is not new. Quite the opposite, an in-depth historical study conducted by Lygia S. Viégas (2009) reveals that there have been references to the so called *automatic promotion* in the Brazilian educational discourse at least since the early 20th century, with a highlight to the First Republic and to the developmental period.

A landmark in the defense of automatic promotion in Brazil is the open letter from Sampaio Dória to Oscar Thompson, published in 1918, under the title *Contra o analfabetismo* (against illiteracy), in which the author proposes, as a strategy to meet the objective of teaching literacy to the people *without burdening the public budget*,

to promote from first grade to second grade all students who have had the benefit of a school year, and only those in retard should be retained in the same grade, if there are no candidates to the places that would be occupied. (p. 65)¹

In another passage, he declares the intention of not denying registration to new candidates “just because they are lazy, or abnormal, they would have to fail” (p. 78).

It is remarkable that, since the mention by this first author of such a project in Brazil, there comes the criticism to the imposition of the idea: “Reforms in ink, no matter how meritorious they are, worth nothing” (p. 63). Instead, he contends that, if the teacher “has no personal interest, everything will end up in nothing.” To ensure adherence, he assumes it is sufficient that,

in addition to the scarce wages of today, an annual compensation be provided to them,

1- As a result of automatic promotion, Sampaio Dória devises other measures, including the simplification of the curriculum and putting students who were behind in their academic achievement in special classes.

an amount for each child he manages to become literate. Only then, instead of the current 50% rate, the Teacher will be certainly able to provide literacy skills to 90% of the children who are given to him. (p. 63)

The debate about automatic promotion was no longer an issue in the national publications, and came back into light only by the end of the 1950's when the subject was dealt with mainly in the *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Pedagógicos* (Brazilian review of pedagogical studies). Several national leaders took part in the debate, either in favor or against the idea.

Among the documents produced at that time are the *Recomendações da Conferência Regional Latino-Americana sobre educação primária gratuita e obrigatória* [(recommendations by the Latin American regional Conference on public and compulsory primary education), 1956], in which automatic promotion appears in the topic *administration and funding*, taking an economic hue. The document reads as follows:

An attempt must be taken to resolve the serious problem of school retention which represents a major financial loss and withdraws educational opportunities from a considerable mass of children who, according to their age, should be in school by doing the following: a) the revision of the promotion system in primary school, with the purpose of making it less selective; b) the study, with the participation of the teaching staff in the primary schools, of a promotion scheme based on the student's chronological age and other aspects of pedagogical value, and apply such study, *experimentally*, in the first grades of schooling. (p. 166, grifos nossos)

Once more, the role of the teacher stands out, as he should be prepared to “apply in an intelligent manner the plans and programs and effectively participate in the revision thereof” (p.173). Thus, it is

recommended that the training and the wage should be improved, new staff should be hired, the number of students in each class should be reduced, teachers should be sorted out according to their degree of efficiency and the reason why teachers abandon their career should be investigated. Also, the involvement of teachers in the making of educational policies should be encouraged.

Many are the authors who wrote about this subject in the 1950's, including Almeida Júnior (1957), President Juscelino Kubitschek (1957) and Dante Moreira Leite (1959/1999). These three authors share the criticism to the high levels of retention and they defend the idea that, in order to be successful, such program should be accompanied by a number of conditions associated mainly to teacher education and appreciation. Both Almeida Junior and Dante Moreira criticize the implementation of it in the name of the law. Only the latter, however, does not mention economic issues when defending the project, focusing aspects of infant development. The former, in turn, talks about the subject having in mind a number of North-American and European experiences.

Thus, the analysis of the historical bibliography on automatic promotion reveals that the idea of abolishing failure in public schools has been defended in Brazil at least since the First Republic, and it is intensely resumed in the developmental period. During the aforementioned period the first experimental implementation of the proposal takes place in São Paulo.

The automatic promotion in *Experimental School of Lapa*

The second half of the 1950's was a period of intense debate about automatic promotion, a moment when even those who defended the idea emphasized the importance of ensuring conditions so that such project could be successful. It was within this context that an attempt of implementing it was taken

in the *Experimental School of Lapa*, an official research unit with the São Paulo State Education Department.

Before analyzing such experience, the implementation project will be presented. Then, portions of testimonies by some of those who took part in it will be revealed and, finally, rare documents dealing with this pioneering experience in Brazil will be brought to light.

The automatic promotion project in the *Experimental School of Lapa*

The aforementioned project, in compliance with the *Recommendations* quoted above, had a experimental purpose. Devised in 1959 and set in motion in 1960, it was published only in 1961, as a typed brochure – found in the Library of the Education College of the University of São Paulo –, and was signed by the technical-didactical assistant Elsa Lima Gonçalves Antunha (who wrote the project), the school principal Ulysses Lombardi and the psychologist of the Section of School Mental Hygiene Haydée Pereira Bueno (ANTUNHA; LOMBARDI; BUENO, 1961).

Upfront, a note warns that the project was based on the *constant calls* for renovation, especially in order to resolve the problem of school retention, whose consequences were overcrowded classes, lack of vacancies, dropout, and administrative, pedagogical, and psychological problems. Insisting on the experimental nature, the text stresses that *final conclusions* would be presented after five years.

In the introduction, an analysis of São Paulo schools highlights the high rate of retentions, which is pointed out as an evident consequence of a crisis. In addition, the document argues that retention would mean a burden to the State and severe damages to the child and his/her family, especially psychological damages. Thus, it was urgent to adopt measures to improve the schools: facilities, length of the school year, teacher education, curriculum, planning, teaching materials, evaluation criteria and class organization.

Despite acknowledging that, “if current conditions are maintained”, schools would not overcome their difficulties, as they depended on “several actions, of several orders, especially on the part of the State-level administration”, the text believes it is possible to use “resources of school organization and methods” to “attenuate the harms suffered by the schools”, including “retention and the consequent boring and unnecessary repetition of the same school activities” (p. 6).

To shed light on the issue, the French, the English and the North-American experiences are resumed and it was stressed that in Brazil the movement for

gradual and continuous passage of the child through the various grades of primary school” was growing, which in turn assured each child to remain at least four year in school, in classes that were adequate to his/her learning possibilities. (p. 6)

In fact, in 1958 according to what the document says, Prof. Luiz Contier, as General Director of the Education Department, consulted the Experimental School of Lapa about the possibility of testing the automatic promotion system. The decision made by the school principal then was that the idea was not mature yet. The subject came up again in the following year, under the management of Prof. Carlos Pasquale, when it was considered to be the right moment to implement the automatic promotion, so the project got started.

Regarding the name of *automatic promotion*, there was a concern that such expression would demoralize the regimen, serving for “purposes other than the child’s interest” (p. 6). To avoid confusion, the document highlights the need for careful preparation, as well as an experimental plan to be conducted with great depth, whose conclusions would be the ground to extend it for the entire school system. Thus, the plan mentioned that the second half of 1959 would be dedicated to

making the school ready for the change, which would begin only in 1960. Additionally, the project should be called *effective achievement*, and not *automatic promotion*.

The main assumption was that,

given certain minimum conditions, the adoption of the automatic promotion regimen (effective achievement) in the Sao Paulo schools will meet the child’s needs. (p. 7)

The proposal was inspired by Almeida Júnior, by publications in the *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Pedagógicos* (Brazilian review of pedagogical studies), studies by the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (INEP), as well as by foreign educators. The aim of implementation was to observe if automatic promotion met the educational interests and how students, teachers, community and school management would react to such system.

In compliance with the proposal, classes would be sorted out by grouping and regrouping students according to their “possibilities” or “effective achievement”, which would be stipulated by a “classifying group, consisting of the principal, technical/didactic assistant, psychologist, and the teacher of the previous grade” (p. 9-10). Each class, in turn, would develop a specific work, based on the student achievement, in order to ensure continuity to the schooling process.

The organization of classes, always based on the students age, would be as follows: 1st grade, defined according to the pre-school report or formal and informal tests; intermediate or transition grade, for children who “under equal schooling conditions, did not manage to obtain a minimum amount required as effective achievement in any of the 2nd grade classes”; or under “peculiar conditions of development, which may require more specific assistance” (p.11); 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades, sorted out according to previous evaluation; and, if necessary, classes of amending teaching, for students who, at the end of the 4th grade, had not

“achieved a minimum amount of learning that is deemed necessary as elementary education” (p.11). One can notice, therefore, that the primary teaching would be performed at least in four years and no longer than six years (in case the student went through the intermediate and amending classes)².

Concerning the curriculum, the learning materials and teaching methods, the project says it would take as reference the currently in force *Program of elementary school teaching*, although it highlights there would be flexibility, considering the effective achievement of each class. Thus, each group would function in a way close to the possibilities of students, avoiding “to cause frustrations in the student who was behind the others or boredom to the student who was advanced” (p. 11-12). Finally, the text mention the concern in attracting students by means of projects what would foster freedom of expression.

Evaluation would be based on daily assignments and on regular checks by means of tests, exams and schooling scales. It must also be stressed that evaluation would *never* be used as a criterion for promotion, but as “means to verify learning, for revision and redistribution of curriculum contents, class regrouping and reorganization” (p. 12). Of strictly qualitative nature and based on the qualitative notation report³, the objective of evaluation would be “promoting and enhancing the cooperation between parents and teachers in their joint effort to raise and educate the child”, and also, “whenever possible” (p. 13), to encourage the advancement and achievement by the student. It is also suggested that a global analysis of the student’s profile be performed, including socioeconomic status, physical condition, personality and readiness, which would be the ground to develop the curriculum for each class, allowing for a better follow-up.

The project depicts teachers as a “decisive part in the experience that is about to be tried

out” (p. 15). Thus, the current faculty would be maintained so that the previous teaching work would guide the project’s impact. At the same time, it is said that “teachers whose personalities or unable to adapt to this type of research will be dismissed if they are deemed inadequate by those in charge of the initiative” (p. 15). Participants would be provided with assistance and guidance by means of courses, scholarships, pedagogical meetings, library and guided participation in extracurricular activity, with the purpose of “restructuring a great deal of their values and attitudes, and a progressive adaptation to situations completely unheard of in our milieu” (p. 15).

The project also included measures to tie up the relationship between family and school: “all necessary clarification will be provided and all guidance will be given to the families, regarding the meaning and the importance of this experience”. For such, regular meetings would be scheduled, “especially at the time of handing out the student’s school report” (p. 16), when teachers point out the student’s difficulties and means to remedy them, and a moment when they talk to parents with the aim of rescuing the child’s rights, quoting the consequences of infantile work and the respect and acceptance of limits and potentialities.

Finally, the project acknowledges that there could be administrative problems. In order to resolve them, conditions are listed that should be offered: moral and material support by the authorities; acquisition of teaching and working materials; hiring teachers and supporting staff; the most complete technical autonomy, avoiding external interference, especially political interference; monthly compensation to participants. Provided all of those guarantees, the project bets the experience would be successful.

Memories of participants in automatic promotion at the Experimental School of Lapa

Although the project’s document has been found at the Library of the School of Education

2- The document also states that the extension of primary education to six years would thus be analyzed.

3- This was the project conducted at the Experimental School, which made changes in evaluation (ANTUNHA, 1960).

in the University of São Paulo, it would not be possible to locate, in several other libraries, the promised final report containing the analysis of the project's impacts. However, considering the remarkable historical value of such experience, pioneer in automatic promotion in Brazil, an investigation was started to find precious documents and old participants that could contribute with testimonies about the way they experienced the initiative.

The first step was to visit the premises where at that time the Experimental School of Lapa was in operation, in order to look for records about the experience in the school's data collection. This first contact showed that a portion of the old documentation had been transferred to the School District (SD). In addition, something surprising came up: the current management team of the school was not aware of what had happened in the 1960's, the pioneering implementation of automatic promotion procedures.

The contact with the School District was also surprising: again, there were no documents about the old experience and everybody at that office ignored that something similar had taken place at the Experimental School of Lapa. In a certain way, they even showed some astonishment when they heard the words *automatic promotion*. In a brief but intense testimony by an former educator from the Experimental School who became a school supervisor at the district, we got to know that the experimental schools had been dismantled (a process starting at the time of the Military Dictatorship and completed in the 1990's), characterized not only by the fact that the schools had been shut down, but also by the systematic erasure of their memories. Supporting the supervisor's assessment, he told that there was a fire in the school's library, when many documents were destroyed.

Going on with the research about the automatic promotion set in motion by the Experimental School of, we were able to interview a number of persons who took part in the project, either in a formal way or through

non-recorded conversations. This phase of the research had the participation of the technical assistant who wrote the project, the school principal and two teachers from that time. Of semi-directed nature, such interviews brought a rich material to our study whose purpose was to reveal this pioneering experience.

A central point among these testimonies was that stated by the technical assistant who wrote the project. In fact, a number of conversations took place both personally and by telephone in which she gave details, since the very first moment, about the process of implementing the automatic promotion the Experimental School of Lapa, recovering memories and making her personal collection available with several texts from that time.

Although she had been invited by policymakers at the time to develop the project involving automatic promotion, and indeed she became its creator, the technical assistant declared she was unable to participate in it until the end because she was removed in the context of a change of policymakers that took place in the last days of 1961. Thus, she did not know if the initiative had been carried on or if the final report had been written.

In relation to the Experimental School, she emphasized that there was a set of projects which, linked to automatic promotion, printed a clear outline to the school as a whole, mainly self-evaluation by students and the admission of disabled persons. Thus, it was impossible to separate the various experiences from the bigger picture. She also said that the school was criticized because allegedly they worked with elite students only, and not all the public schools had the quality of education they had in the Lapa unit. Despite the criticisms, she argued that schools with that profile were important and highlighted the willingness to extend the successful experiences to the entire school system instead of creating a privileged niche.

To provide automatic promotion with a solid ground, she criticized the structure of threats and surveillance by traditional

schooling, and she says that this had to be changed. On the other hand, she emphasized that automatic promotion and inclusion should be “responsible”, and should not disregard the children’s need and the quality of teaching. At this moment, she pointed out the difference between the former project and the current idea of continued progress, thus showing her concern with the indispensable quality and with the investment that a project of such nature necessarily requires.

According to her account, the automatic promotion adopted by the Experimental School was not based on the argument of self-esteem or the trauma of retention, since “passing to the next grade without learning also produces a trauma a low self-esteem”. The proposal was to place the child in the center of the educational process so that his/her needs could be met. For this reason, it did not make sense to fail a grade, to do it again, if the child had difficulties in just a few parts of the curriculum. The idea was that schooling should go on, starting with contents from where the child had stopped. In addition, there was an intense training of teachers, students and family members, all of them “aware” of the project’s purposes.

Through field work, it was possible to record the memories of the former principal of the Experimental School of Lapa. In his testimony, he was remarkably proud of having been the head of that institution and emphasized his participation in the automatic promotion project. About such experience, he recalled the intense teacher training as well as the active participation of students and Family members in the making of the process, of them well aware of project and its consequences.

Finally, we talked to two former female teachers. We had a brief informal conversation with one of them in which she said that if automatic promotion was successful in the Experimental School, that resulted from the effort of the school professionals who almost voluntarily took part in making a school of a different kind, and she also highlighted the fact

that there was little support the state Education Department. Thus, she mentioned the collective willingness to face challenges and countless meetings (for which teacher did not get paid), stressing that “in fact, it was teamwork”.

This teacher also said it was impossible to separate automatic promotion from other experiences that were being conducted, including reinforcement classes (provided throughout the year and during the vacation period), and the inclusion of the disabled. As she put it, despite the difficulties of teachers in working with such students, a consequence of the deficient teacher education, there an immense will to overcome problems. She remembered the efforts made to bring school and families together, even if the community served by the school was internally diversified, where students where either children of university professors or of illiterate parents. For her, all these projects were born from the needs detected by the school, and they made sense for those involved in it.

In her account, the teacher emphasized that many of those experiences had been recently implemented by means of legislation, and she criticized this ways of making educational policies: “if it does not come from the inside, I don’t believe in it”. To support this idea, she added that, in order to make automatic promotion work, it is necessary to take care of teachers, as well as to pay attention to the children and their families, as they must have confidence in the proposal.

When describing the automatic promotion in the Experimental School, the teacher pointed out that children were not “abandoned to their own”. On the contrary, there was “remediation” (extra classes for students who are behind their classmates), and also “anticipated reinforcement”, that is, before starting a subject with the class, its contents are given “weak” learners, producing a curious effect: they learned before the “strong” students, reinforcing their desire to learn and self-esteem.

Another aspect that was recalled was the intermediate class, aimed at students who had learned less but who, due to automatic promotion, should progress. Considering the importance of looking at the student's whole picture, the idea was to carry on with his/her school trajectory from where they had stopped, going "as further as possible". For her, this experience was "very good", since there were less student per classroom and the best teachers worked with a variety of strategies (cultural and playful resources, close contact with the family). The interviewed teacher remembered that some learners went back to the regular class before the end of the school year.

She also seemed compassionate in regard of the experimental schools being shut down, and she mentioned they had been deteriorating along time, which had nothing to do with the very educational issue. She was especially sorry to see that, today, there were no vestiges at all of what had existed before. She also recalled a fire in the school, when the reports of the most significant experiences were lost.

Finally, a long interview was recorded with a teacher who worked in the Experimental School of Lapa between 1960 and 1988, and she left only because she had retired: "when I first joined the school I was single, and one year after I retired I became a grandmother". Since the first moment, this teacher gave us an emotional account of the years she spent at the school, where a great deal of her professional life took place, described many time with adjectives such as "amazing", "wonderful", "unforgettable".

She said that automatic promotion was part of bigger plan for the school, combining experiences that she found it hard to separate: self-evaluation, inclusion, art training and the preparation of teacher training textbooks, which had great similarity with the forthcoming *National Curriculum Parameters*. Proudly, she stressed the objective of spreading the successful projects to the entire school system. Thus, although there were difficulties that often come

along with innovations, everyone was committed to the building of a quality school, which could be seen in the endless planning meetings on Saturdays that teachers attended although they did not get any money for that.

According to her account, automatic promotion in the Experimental School of Lapa happened naturally, and it was so rooted that she could not remember when or why it was discontinued. Although she admits that some students did get behind, she said teachers worked hard with them so that their education would not be adversely affected.

She taught an intermediate class for a year and this experience is regarded by her as a challenge and an accomplishment. About this experience, she also emphasized that both learners and family members were aware of how the class worked as well as of the automatic promotion scheme.

The teacher's involvement with the school, so remarkable in her personal history, appeared as sadness because part of the memories of what was done in the school had been forgotten, if not erased (as she recalls the fire in the library). She tearfully told us that her distress had increased as, in consequence of our research, she went back to the school and it was totally different from the institution she helped to make.

Publications on Automatic Promotion in the Experimental School of Lapa

As mentioned before, the writer of the automatic promotion project in the Experimental School of Lapa provided a series of rare documents about the experience. Impeccably sorted out by her in a personal folder, many of original versions, typed and bound in small brochures.

Chronologically, the first publication is a note in a newspaper, *A Tribuna*, from the city Santos, dated May 28th, 1961 under the title *Que é promoção automática?* (what is automatic promotion?). Up front, it says that the problem of automatic promotion was in *today's agenda*,

“seen by some as a means to resolve the crisis of lack of vacant places in primary school; contended by others vehemently as a process that will absolutely make void the contents of high-school”. Aware of the experience conducted at the Experimental School of Lapa, the cultural department of newspaper invited Elsa Antunha (1962) to give a lecture on the subject, which was later published in the magazine *Pesquisa e Planejamento* (research and planning) under the title of “Automatic Promotion in Primary School”.

From the very beginning, the author agrees that the subject is controversial, and she says that she will not present “final” conclusions but rather she will “contribute with the debate” by providing theoretical arguments and practical observations about the experience in progress, so her intention is therefore to “exchange ideas, receive suggestions and criticism” (p. 98). She also highlights that there are two sides, as mentioned by the newspaper, one is the pedagogical aspect and the other is the social and economic aspects of the question. From her viewpoint, however, the issue is more complex and she summarizes her opinion as follows:

1) the immediate adoption of the automatic promotion system would not be sufficient alone to resolve the crisis of the lack of vacancies in the primary school; 2) although the careless use of this scheme, without the necessary requirements, may ‘end up in absolutely making the contents of primary school void, adopting it under the conditions that are indispensable for its functioning corresponds entirely to the interests of the primary school and the of child. (p. 99)

Then, she goes deeper in the discussion by emphasizing some *obvious elements* of automatic promotion: availability of school vacancies, better distribution of children along the school grades and years, lowering of retention and dropout. However, she disagrees with the view adopted the education

authorities that automatic promotion would relieve the budget overload and, therefore, it is *sparing* and *practical*, when she considers: “it is necessary not to forget that setting the conditions indispensable so that the scheme can work, honestly speaking, will naturally increase the expenses with education” (p. 99). She continues:

It does not seem that adopting the automatic promotion system would drop the expenses with education. It is rather the opposite, in order to reach the conditions that permit avoiding retention, with the resulting advantages, it would be necessary that policymakers realize that education, if really efficient, it not only a highly profitable investment but it is also expensive, as it requires massive funding for buildings, school materials, wages, etc. (p. 100)

In addition to the economic issue, the author criticizes an imposed implementation:

the solution for the problems of Brazilian primary education does not consist in changing ‘by decree’ a system that is, above all, the consequence of a series of conditions that make it inefficient and anti-democratic, instead such conditions should be tackled, should be overcome, eventually. (p. 100)

According to Antunha, in order to overcome school retention, barriers that make school selective and competitive have to be eliminated, then new buildings are necessary as well as abolishing the use of shifts, the distribution of learning materials, teacher education, modernization of methods and curricula, parents’ guidance and the increase in the sense of child responsibility. Such measures would lead “‘automatically’ to the elimination of retentions”, as “in a school with all of aforementioned conditions, there could not be cause to, unless circumstantially, low achievement and, therefore, failure” (p. 100-101).

Thus, “simply abandoning the scheme of retention” could “even aggravate the current situation,” leading to “a total void in the contents of teaching” and “the flexible promotion system would be demoralized”. However, she makes it clear that she is not in favor of retention⁴, but failing a grade could give a “certain semblance of seriousness”, as it makes students to fulfill the school’s demands and parents to have their children study “at least in the eve of exams” (p. 101).

Antunha advocates that, while fear and coercion are not replaced with the child’s interest and responsibility, it will not be possible to have a successful change in the school, because this relies on teacher education and the family’s understanding of and involvement in the schooling process.

The author also analyzes the reactions against the proposal as a consequence of the *inadequate* name given to it, that is, the negative meaning of the word *automatic*. However, she declares that the intent is not to create a mechanical or unconscious scheme. It rather implies a “significant increase of responsibilities on the part of the government, of managers, teachers, parents and the children too” (p. 103).

Unlike that view, the automatic promotion would be the “the learning gradually and continuously going through the successive grades of elementary school, so that he or she is ensured to have the right of being there for all the time provided for by the law, in conditions that are adequate to his/her possibilities of learning” (p. 103-104). Antunha then emphasizes the absence of gaps in the program and end of prejudice that asserts that teaching must be developed taking the average student into account. In addition, she reiterates the adequacy of the expression *promotion by effective achievement*, and she explains its meaning: the student is sent to the next grade based on his/her age and the classes

4- The author criticizes retention based on several reasons: the child is solely accounted for it; a fatalist conception of the student’s potentialities; disrespect of differences; overvaluation of exams; curricular discontinuity; boring, unfair and unnecessary repetition of contents; turbulence, fraud and insecurity of learners (p. 101-103).

are organized according to the real possibilities of learning. Thus, there were classes of upper grades learning contents that were simpler than those given in initial grades. The project assumed therefore that two aspects should homogeneous: age and performance⁵.

As a conclusion, the author says automatic promotion is viable “provided that all indispensable measures are taken”, and emphasizes teacher training, parents’ guidance, the use of active methods, focus on qualitative evaluation and self-appreciation by students. In addition, she says that, if the child’s potential is respected, there will be a “significant increase in his/her school achievement”, and finally she bets: “thus, the school will no longer be selective. It will educate everyone in the level he or she can reach. Society needs everyone, regardless of how uniform are their skills” (p. 107-108). Antunha ends with a question: “as the school can only demand from the learner what he or she can do and, on their turn, he or she only does what is within his or her reach, why should we fail them?” (p. 109).

Another relevant publication about automatic promotion in the Experimental School of Lapa is in the book by Mere Abramowicz, Marisa Del Cioppo Elias, and Teresinha Maria Neli Silva (1987). With the purpose of discussing the possibilities and limits of educational innovations in the early grades of schooling, the authors developed case studies, and one of them concerns the *school of effective achievement*. The research was conducted by using testimonies and the authors regret, in the preface, that it was difficult to find documents about such experience. They put it this way: “There is no tradition in our educational milieu of conserving the memory of public education. And when documents are not conserved, valued, but rather destroyed and smitten, it is hard to reconstruct the educational facts” (p. XVI).

5- A autora reconhece a polêmica em torno da homogeneização das classes, afirmando que se trata, em realidade, de “classes com menor limite de variação” (p. 106-107). Destaca, ainda, que a localização de um aluno em determinada classe não representava um fatalismo, tendo em vista a possibilidade de remanejamento.

Analyzing in a generic manner the experiences under research, the authors define them as *timid*, and highlight the implications arising from the (lack of) political willingness to overcome the difficulties. “Thus, successful experiences are discontinued just because key persons are removed from office, because funding is cut off, which adversely affects the administrative solutions that are necessary or, also, because laws are passed but remain ‘ink on paper’ and they are not really enforced”. Out of the way is the work of teachers who “fight to find the routes leading to the learner’s development, even if stumbling on difficulties imposed by the system, which sometimes are insurmountable” (p. 2).

In relation to automatic promotion, the authors define it as a technical-pedagogical measure, as it is supported by “some resources of school organization, methods, achievement evaluation, in attempt to resolve the problem of retention in primary school” (p. 10). In order to get to know the automatic promotion implemented by the Experimental School of Lapa, interviews were made with some persons involved in it (teachers, school principal, technical assistant, Portuguese language advisor, and psychologist).

Concerning the organization of classes and the grouping of students, they say classes should be divided according to effective achievement. However, according to a teacher, such criterion coincides with the economic aspect, that is, the best learners were the wealthiest and were placed in the best classes which predominated in the morning shift. As a result,

parents fought to enroll their children in the prime-time shift and the students themselves began thinking they were privileged and treated their colleagues (from other shifts) in a different way. (p. 12)

A teacher remembered formerly retention was not significant, as the school counted with administrative, technical and material

infrastructure, and had skilled and prepared teachers, aspects that are also mentioned by the technical assistant and by the school principal, as both emphasize that spreading the scheme to the entire school system would be successful only if the same happened in the other schools. The principal also said that it was not about pushing the student forward but providing him/her with good teaching.

According to the testimonies, one gets to know that the amending teaching class was not implemented, but no reason is given to explain the fact. About the intermediate class, the technical assistant recalls that the idea came up due to the concern with learners that could not be retained but who were unable to follow the regular class. The intent was to “apprehend the core of what was blocking the achievement”, “provide a solid ground and eliminate the bottlenecks found by children in the 1st grade.” (p.14) As she puts it, her own son was in such class, and she adds that some students were sent back to regular class before the end of the year.

Two teachers also mentioned the intermediate classes and pointed out these groups had few students, but even so they faced difficulties. One of them said that no matter how skilled, these teachers were labeled weak; another defined the experience as *hard* and *dangerous*, and she saw students as a *problem*. She said she had to simultaneously meet the difficulties gone through by some and cover the entire contents to all. Consequently, only the minimum contents were taught, which increased the group’s difficulties and the adaptation problems faced by students when they returned to regular class.

The coordinator of Portuguese teaching agreed in defining automatic promotion as *hard*. For her, it was *madness* to pass students who had not learned the required knowledge, an idea also utilized to define the homogenous grouping of learners. This showed that teachers, especially those who were more dynamic, were reluctant to the scheme because they thought it was useless to teach slow students. Her

testimony reveals that 1st graders were retained if they did not grasp a minimum of contents that was required even in the intermediate class. In turn, the school principal said parents of students in the intermediate classes, even if they were not aware of the process, were upset and anxious with such situation.

In relation to the programs and methods, all the interviewees highlighted they were adequate to the pace of students, as there was freedom to try out more active and dynamic teaching methods. Still concerning this aspect, the Portuguese-language advisor said the reinforcement was developed with activities that were *lighter*, playful and cultural. As these activities always took place in the opposite shift of regular classes, a scheme was created to provide lunch and a snack, whose menu was prepared by a nutritionist.

About evaluation, testimonies mentioned the constant appreciation of effective achievement by students, taking into account the daily work and the periodical checks. The evaluation criterion was qualitative, as grades were given in letters, not numbers. The school principal remembered it was hard for parents and students to understand the new evaluation process, and they often requested grades to be assigned in numbers. However, such difficulty was dealt with until everybody became confident in the work being done. The technical assistant pointed out efforts were made so that students could grasp that automatic promotion did not mean they would just pass to the next grade.

About the follow-up of the teaching work, the school principal says it involved other school staff as well as parents and students by holding meetings to sensitize everyone about automatic promotion.

Last, the authors of the study conclude that “this experience showed that the system of automatic promotion is incompatible with quality teaching” (p. 28), especially if it is implemented in a school of precarious structure and organization⁶.

⁶ - “A questão educacional exige qualidade e [...] essa qualidade custa dinheiro e investimento em recursos humanos, única forma de garantir sua

By arguing that the problem faced by the school goes beyond the technical/administrative aspects as it also deals with political, psychosocial and development issues, they say:

The fact that students are different in their pace of learning and are subject to multiple factors that affect their achievement made it impossible to reach the desired parallel progress in the same classroom. Any attempt of levelling students for the sole purpose of promoting them from one grade to the next ended up in bottlenecks for the learner and it was difficult for the teacher to resolve them. We found that this situation is transferred to the entire schooling of a student and as further as it goes it becomes harder and harder to overcome obstacles. Automatic promotion, as a legal and administrative measure, has contributed to aggravate the high-school crisis, concealing its real problems and difficulties. (p. 28)

From this viewpoint, the authors define the intermediate class as a *disguise*, since it came up with the idea of confronting the need to retain students, something impossible in the new system. Uncovered by parents and students, the situation gave a negative meaning to such class, turning people against it. Moreover, it was difficult to change the mind of those involved in the process as it would be required to make the new evaluation successful.

As a positive aspect, the authors indicate the good technical, administrative, material and teaching infrastructure. They also mention the attempts to change the evaluation, which however, *uncovered* the fact that “automatic promotion was impracticable.” (p.30)

Last, they doubt that ideas coming from abroad would be fruitful and question the lack of political will to set up a public school system of quality, represented by the constant threat

durabilidade” (p. 77).

of shutting down the experimental schools by accusing them of having only elite students. Thus, the staff was always on alert, which disturbed the peace of mind necessary to fully carry out the work. However,

Even if they were actual 'islands' within the teaching system, the experimental schools managed to show that it is possible to improve the quality of teaching and it is possible to perform education in its 'wide' sense. As an alternative school, distinguished and democratic, it managed to gather children from all social layers and provide them with broad opportunities of development. It managed to be a school of good quality for all those that came to it. (p. 31)

In fact, history has proven its dismantling: all experimental schools in São Paulo were closed and turned in a regular school.

Final considerations

To understand the proposal of automatic promotion implemented in the Experimental School of Lapa, it is crucial to see the context in which it happened, a moment of intense debate around the idea that had started decades before, revealing that the high number of retentions is an old problem and has not yet been resolved in Brazil. By reading documents from that time one can see that, since the beginning, there were voices pro and against the scheme, as even such texts have always listed the conditions required to ensure the success of automatic promotion and, at the same time, they criticized that it should be done under legal imposition.

It must be also highlighted that it is a project coming from abroad but it does not acknowledge the fact that the foreign educational systems are very different from Brazil's school system, as here we still face problems that have been dealt with in other countries. This structure for implementing public policies is

not restricted to the educational field, but rather a constant pattern in the Brazilian history. It is from this viewpoint that Roberto Schwarz (1977) states that "along its social reproduction, Brazil restlessly places and replaces European ideas, always in an improper sense" (p. 77). For this author, in Brazil, "the test of reality did not seem important. It is as if coherence and generality did not matter very much" (p. 63). A forerunner of such ideas, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1999) says in a rather assuring and disconcerting way:

The attempt to implement the European culture in a far-reaching territory, endowed with natural conditions, if not adverse, largely foreign to its millenary tradition, it is in the origins of the Brazilian society the prevailing fact that is the richest in consequences. Bringing from distant countries our forms of conviviality, our institutions, our ideas, and marking everything in an environment that is often unfavorable and hostile, we are to this exiled people in our own land. (p. 31)

In fact, bringing automatic promotion from abroad had to do with local demands. Unlike other countries, it was always defended here as a way to get around the high rate of retentions, and criticized mainly under an economic viewpoint. Only Dante Moreira Leite and Elsa Antunha did not stress the financial nature of automatic promotion; the former does not even mention this aspect, and the latter says that the success of automatic promotion entails more expenses rather than the saving of resources.

By analyzing the automatic promotion implemented in the Experimental School of Lapa, one can notice that it was supported by a naturalized view of the child development, seen with the ideological eyes of differences in capacity and skill. In the wake of this conception, separated classes are made up for weak learners, who are generally the poorer, which reinforces prejudices.

It must be highlighted that the fundamental conditions, pointed out by Sampaio Dória and others, were present in the Experimental School of Lapa, with the purpose of ensuring automatic promotion to succeed: a small number of students in the classroom, teacher training, changes in the methods, programs and evaluation, but mainly, a deep dialogue with participants – teachers, learners and families. Even so, one can observe that difficulties and controversies came up when the proposal was carried out.

It is outstanding that the discussion about ensuring such conditions vanished in context of the recent attempt to implement continuous progression. The situation is worsened if one takes into account that such policy ignored the aforementioned conditions, and the proposal was implemented by utilizing the extremely criticized legal imposition.

The disdain towards the debate reinforces the disdain for history. In fact, the projects conducted by the Experimental School are not remembered, sometimes they are even erased from memory. The school library fire destroyed the records of pioneering projects which today have curiously passed as laws for the public schools; laws which ironically disregard the experiences that were precisely carried out to strengthen such programs. Although there are no evidence of political motif, and even if it is seen as a hazard, such fire claims that one thinks it over. The analysis of Brazilian history reveals that burning up documents is a constant resource to destroy files and erase the nation's memory, ironically referred to as a *short-term* memory.

Again, we talk about an imported resource. According to José Castello (2006), burning up books is as old as the very existence of books. In a brief incursion through history, from Mesopotamia to current days, the author reveals that moral, religious and political motivation has led to the destruction of millions of books, not to mention whole libraries, a strategy adopted by both conservatives and liberals who share the idea that some writings are dangers and must be kept silent.

In the contraflow of this vision, Theodor Adorno (2003) emphasizes how important it is to know and elaborate the past. As he puts it, the “terrible image of a humankind with no memory” is not a mere

product of decay, the way of reacting by some humankind overloaded with stimuli, no longer capable of handling such stimuli, as one usually says, but refers to something necessarily linked with the progressiveness of bourgeois principles. (p. 32)

That is,

Memory, time and remembrance are bumped off by the very bourgeois society in its development, as if they were some kind of irrational remainder, similar to the way the progressive rationalization of procedures in the industry's production eliminates together with the other remainders of the handicraft activity categories such as learning, that is, the time to become experienced in a trade. (p. 33)

The experience of automatic promotion in the Experimental School of Lapa was undeniably forgotten, or even disowned. And now, with continuous progression, the idea is issued as a novelty. Thus, the path is opened so that the same mistakes and difficulties come back and the public educational policy goes on as an eternal reinvention of old strategies. One is then allowed to ask the question: what have we learned with our own history? How can we understand the State policies that are little or not evaluated at all?

The *déjà vu* of policies which, even when implemented, resulted in minor changes of the educational picture entails feelings of indignation, discredit and discouragement. We take as ours the words of Darcy Ribeiro, Brazil is a country which wastes lives, including in the field of education. We know that education imprints marks on generations and we have no

time left to perform or to propose innovations (which not always are really innovating!) that disregard the history of education, the educational and political practices that were unsuccessful.

A new perspective to look at the educational phenomenon must necessarily be followed by a critical and proactive approach

to overcome educational difficulties. Today, we have precious data in hand about the Brazilian school system. There is nothing else we can do but invest in political proposals that are really feasible, whose structure for implementation in fact exists. The knowledge produced by those who fight for a school for all indicates many alternative routes and possibilities.

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Lygia S. Viégas is adjunct professor at the School of Education of the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), psychologist, M.A and Ph.D in School and Human Development Psychology by the University of São Paulo (USP).

Marilene P. R. Souza is psychologist, M.A. and Ph.D. in School and Human Development Psychology by the University of São Paulo (USP). She is a Ph.D assistant professor in the Institute of Psychology of the University of São Paulo, coordinator of and researcher with the Post-Graduate Program in School and Human Development in the Institute of Psychology of the University of São Paulo. She works in the area of School and Educational Psychology doing research mainly on the following topics: schooling processes, educational public policies, psychologist and teacher education, classroom processes, learning and educational problems, educational ethnographic studies, child and adolescent rightst. She coordinates the Inter-Institutional Laboratory for the Teaching and Research on School Psychology. E-mail: marileneproenca@hotmail.com.