

## SCHOOL DESKS IN THE MATERIAL SCHOOL CULTURE OF BAHIA'S EDUCATION: teaching knowledge, medical-hygienist knowledge (1880-1885)

Carteiras escolares na cultura material escolar da instrução baiana:  
saber docente, saber médico-higiênico (1880-1885)

Pupitres escolares en la cultura material escolar de la instrucción baiana:  
conocimientos docentes, conocimientos médicos-higiénicos (1880-1885)

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the materiality of school desks at the intersection between teaching knowledge and medical-hygienist knowledge, concerning the replacement of furniture in some public schools in Salvador, from 1881 to 1885, following the opinion of a commission composed of physicians, as well as method teachers from the Men's Normal Day School. To this end, it uses as sources four Public Instruction reports, requests for school furniture issued by teachers, and two articles published in *Gazeta Médica da Bahia* on hygiene in schools. Theoretically and methodologically, it is anchored in the French Cultural History, problematizing, from a micro historical perspective, school cultural practices expressed in prescriptions and opinions on school furniture, and in the Brazilian production on the History of Education in terms of School Materiality and School Hygiene.

**Keywords:** school materiality; school furniture; school hygiene.

**Resumo:** O artigo enfoca a materialidade das carteiras escolares entre o saber docente e o saber médico higienista na substituição do mobiliário em algumas aulas públicas de Salvador, entre 1881 e 1885, acatando o parecer de comissão formada por médicos e professores de métodos do Externato Normal de Homens. Para tanto, utiliza como fontes quatro relatórios da Instrução Pública, pedidos de mobiliário escolar por docentes e dois artigos da *Gazeta Médica da Bahia* sobre a Higiene nas escolas. Teórico-metodologicamente, ancora-se na História Cultural Francesa, problematizando micro historicamente práticas culturais escolares expressas em prescrições e pareceres sobre a mobília escolar e na produção brasileira da História da Educação quanto à Materialidade Escolar e Higiene Escolar.

**Palavras-chave:** materialidade escolar; mobiliário escolar; higiene escolar.

**Resumen:** El artículo se centra en la materialidad de los pupitres escolares entre el saber docente y el saber médico higienista en la reposición de mobiliario en algunas aulas públicas de Salvador, entre 1881 y 1885, siguiendo el dictamen de una comisión formada por médicos y profesores de métodos del Externado Normal de Homens. Utiliza cuatro informes de Instrucción Pública como fuentes; solicitudes de mobiliario escolar por parte de los docentes; y dos artículos del *Gazeta Médica da Bahia* sobre Higiene en las escuelas. Teórica y metodológicamente, se ancla en la Historia Cultural Francesa, problematizando microhistóricamente las prácticas culturales escolares expresadas en prescripciones y opiniones sobre el mobiliario escolar; y en la producción brasileña de Historia de la Educación sobre Materialidad Escolar e Higiene Escolar.

**Palabras clave:** materialidad escolar; muebles escolar; higiene escolar.

## INTRODUCTION

This article presents a research on the materiality of school desks at the intersection between teaching knowledge and medical-hygienist knowledge, from episodes that show an attempt to replace American-origin<sup>1</sup> furniture with German furniture in some public schools of Salvador, between 1881 and 1885, following the opinion of a commission composed of physicians, as well as method teachers from the Men's Normal Day School. I articulate this work with a broader research on the making and uses of school objects in the nineteenth-century Bahia, within the spheres of pedagogical and medical-hygienist knowledge that were consolidated in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as pointed out by Jose Gondra (2003, 2018).

The school desk is problematized as an artifact (Vidal, 2017) of the material school culture that was constituted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As an object, there was an attempt to replace the usual American models of school benches and desks with German ones in the classrooms of the men's normal school and in some public schools in the parishes of Salvador, under the administration of Canon Romualdo Maria de Seixas Barroso, when he was the general director of instruction in the province.

The reflection I carry out is in the sense that this process evidences tensions and disputes in the Material School Culture of the nineteenth-century Bahia (Vidal, 2009, 2017), with highlight to: 1) the constitution of a body of teachers that were specializing as "pedagogists"<sup>2</sup>, composed of teachers of "Teaching Methods" from the men's normal day school; 2) the ideals and criticisms of public instruction manifested in journals by a group of doctors from *Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia* (FAMEB), gathered in two major arenas: a) at FAMEB itself, opposing medical education without practice in laboratories; b) creation and management of the *Gazeta Médica* journal, founded in 1868.

In the 1870s, some of these physicians wrote in newspapers about Public Instruction and School Hygiene, evidencing the emergence of new sensitivities about schooled childhood, as occurred in different provinces of the Brazilian empire, which is pointed out, among others, by the studies of José Gondra (2003, 2018, 2022), Heloisa Pimenta Rocha (2010) and Gizele de Souza (2007).

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'American' to match the records of the sources. In research on the materiality of school desks and their internationality, Gustavo Rugoni de Sousa (2019) and Wiara Alcantara (2014) debate on the 'USA desks' category, from the perspective of the transnationalization of artifacts and pedagogical ideas. However, I use the 'American desk' category for an opposition, in terms of nationality, to the 'German desk'.

<sup>2</sup> 'Pedagogist' is the term found in the sources. Antonio Bahia da Silva and Elias Figueredo Nazareth, members of the commission, had previously worked in elementary public teaching at schools in the province or in the parishes.

In Bahia, one of the protagonists was the physician Antônio Pacífico Pereira<sup>3</sup>, who experienced two incisive reforms of public education: the one in 1870, of a conservative nature, and the one in 1881, of a liberal nature. The latter, according to Antonieta Nunes (2008), would be the most important of the period for introducing pedagogical modernities of intuitive teaching.

The educational reform carried out by the government of Antonio de Araújo de Aragão Bulcão sought to apply, in many aspects, the suggestions of the liberal decrees by the Empire's Minister, Leôncio de Carvalho, adapting them, however, to the more conservative reality of Bahia's ruling class. This reform introduced, in the program of primary schools, the Natural Sciences, the Lessons on Things, and Civility, and, in the Normal Courses, both made day schools by this law, the Natural Sciences, Physics and Chemistry, the French Language, Imitation Drawing, and Geometry, Algebra and Trigonometry. The curriculum was no longer merely humanistic and literary (Nunes, 2008, p. 215).

However, the Bulcão reform was criticized by Pacífico Pereira in the *Gazeta Médica* journal, shortly after its approval<sup>4</sup>, for disagreements regarding the length of class sessions, since it did not implement specific periods in the morning or afternoon, leaving one period free. This was an old demand from teachers and families, especially in rural areas, because, then, they would only need to commute once a day.

#### THE LENGTH OF SCHOOL SESSIONS

The reform of public instruction in this province has just been published; in one of its articles, we read the following: <<Teaching will be provided in a daily session, from 9 in the morning to 2 in the afternoon (art. 3).> >

This disposition on the instruction reform is found in such clear opposition to the most decisive indications of school hygiene, and to the very useful precepts of modern pedagogy, that reading this quasi sentence of condemnation issued against the

<sup>3</sup> According to *Academia de Medicina da Bahia*, Antônio Pacífico Pereira was a notable physician in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with republican militancy. Founding member and editor-in-chief of *A Gazeta Médica da Bahia*. Retrieved from: <https://www.academiademedicina-ba.org.br/a-academia/members-titulares/antonio-pacifico-pereira.html>

<sup>4</sup> Conceived in the government of Antonio Aragão Bulcão (1880), enacted on January 5, 1881, and regulated in 1886, it expresses part of the liberal conceptions in Bahia. Its conception counted on Canon Romualdo Barroso, who, shortly after its enactment, took over the direction of Public Instruction, in which he worked for four consecutive years.

unfortunate children that will have to pay such a high price for the free primary education provided by the state has upset us profoundly (Pereira, 1881, p. 296).

However, Antônio Pacífico Pereira's reasons were not those of family customs, domestic demands, or family economy; in his medical-hygienist opinion, a single class session that exceeded four hours a day was contrary to the knowledge and procedures of School Hygiene.

Reading this text by Antônio Pacífico Pereira triggered my desire to investigate the relationships between school materiality and medical and pedagogical knowledge in the nineteenth-century Bahia. Furthermore, this interest led me to information verified in the works and reflections of José Gonçalves Gondra (2003, 2022), Vera Gaspar da Silva (2013), Diana Gonçalves Vidal (2009, 2017), Vera Gaspar da Silva and Raquel Castro (2011), as well as to read the article by Juarez Tuchinski dos Anjos (2022) on school desks for Rio de Janeiro and the Court, and, finally, Cynthia Greive Veiga (2018) on the relationship between economy and school materiality. Moreover, when finalizing this text, I integrated arguments from the theses by Gustavo Rugoni de Sousa (2019) and Wiara Rosa Alcantara (2014), referring to the incorporation of hygienist knowledge in the construction and dissemination of models of school desks in São Paulo and Santa Catarina. Lastly, the article by Gizele de Souza and Vera Gaspar da Silva (2019) about the businesses deals related to the expenditure of the State's budget on school furniture, especially school desks.

Historiographically, this interest in subjects and practices of the nineteenth-century Bahia's school materiality in its relations with medical-hygienist knowledge are inserted in the research fields of the material school culture and school-body hygiene, which have been consolidating in investigations on the History of Education in Brazil, in the last two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with proposals and appropriations of concepts, objects and subjects, anchored in different theoretical-methodological aspects of historiography. In this regard, the categories that I use as conceptual input are "School Culture, Material School Culture, and School Materiality".

Initially, I appropriated the classic conceptual definition by Dominique Julia (2001) that "School Culture" is constituted not only by symbolic aspects, but also by the concrete practices that it expresses or in which it encases itself.

To be brief, school culture could be described as a set of norms that define knowledge to be taught and behaviors to be inculcated, and a set of practices that allow the transmission of this knowledge and the incorporation of these behaviors; norms and practices coordinated with purposes that may vary from time to time (religious, socio-political, or simply socialization purposes) (Julia, 2001, p. 10).

Regarding the articulations of the New Cultural History and its objects, such as gestures, sensitivities, imagination, books, the school, Thaís Nivia Fonseca (2003) underscores that school objects are also cultural objects, such as reading, the teaching methods, books, school furniture, that is, the material school culture. This Material School Culture is made up of both that which is intra-school (pens, blackboards, books, textbooks, syllabaries, handwriting practice notebooks, maps, globes, numerical and mineralogical charts, uniforms and other pieces of clothing) and that which is extra-school (the building, surroundings, access roads, and articulations with institutional spaces of a different type, such as medical-hygienist spaces or their propositions).

For this perception, it was essential for me to reread Vidal's article (2009) on the possibilities of operationalizing the concept of school cultures aggregating materialities, such as school artifacts and the manipulations, prescriptions and bodily performances, which are

[...] effected by writing and non-writing practices (oral or corporeal), in which the various devices that constitute everything that is done in the school are activated, with regard to the lessons and uses of the materiality put into circulation in the school space and times, which allows taking the material school culture as an important indication of school practices (Vidal, 2009, p. 32).

These reflections by Julia, Fonseca and Vidal were my initial bases to problematize the writings of Pacífico Pereira, which argue that the School Culture was never restricted to the limited spaces of classrooms. In this sense, I sought to advance, from Vidal (2009), as the author emphasizes the importance of the "Material School Culture" category when it comes to the following aspects: a) reflection on conservation and innovation in education; b) attention to the material culture as a constitutive element of school practices; and c) valuation of school subjects as social agents.

These three dimensions allowed me to reflect on the role and place of physicians in the constitution of the nineteenth-century Bahia's school materiality. First, when they proposed furniture models, as well as models for the very school locus, giving rise to new forms of school buildings and a whole demand articulated with them. Not by chance, in the period from 1870 to 1881, when doctors began to publish articles on "Hygiene in schools", buildings were renovated in the parishes of Curato da Sé, Mares and Santo Antonio além do Carmo, to serve as "class houses". The notion of a specific school building was also consolidated, culminating, in 1880, in the construction of the first building exclusively intended for classes, through popular subscription and provincial subsidies, in the parish of São Pedro Velho, at Praça da Piedade, inaugurated in 1881.

The second point of medical-hygienist interference reached the perception that the school materiality does not consist of desks only. In this case, they impacted and changed the school methods and practices of both teachers and students, as discussed by Gaspar da Silva and Raquel Castro (2011) and Gustavo Rugoni Sousa (2019), referring to the implementations of this school artifact and its (re)inventions. In Bahia, for instance, the intuitive method became the standard in the Bulcão Reform, in 1881. Finally, regarding the subjects of the materialized school culture, their options and attitudes, as in the tensions and negotiations between the director of instruction and the physician Pacífico Pereira, based on the criticism of the text for the reform of public instruction, in January 1881, which culminated in the creation of a commission to issue an opinion on school desks and the subsequent agenda for the purchase of German desks in 1882.

To understand this purchase process, I dialogued with the thematic historiography. Thus, I verified that Silva (2013) investigated the configurations of the school materiality by comparing Brazil and Portugal and analyzed the school space in the condition of a place of existence of schools, as well as its limitations as to the types and uses of school material in the face of the expansion of the combined practice of reading and writing. In this sense, Silva and Castro (2011) focused on the ability to write and the incorporation of the table and the desk as a school practice in the province of Santa Catarina, based on their new meanings and use as a support for reading and writing.

With the arrival of the teaching of writing, it became essential to have a support to place the blackboard, the slate, or the writing paper. The table or the desk gained space in the classrooms, accompanying teaching methods, and established themselves as objects for enhancing writing. The school's material base would keep up with the changes in the school universe, while pointing to a need for them. Studies about changes of this nature can, therefore, contribute to understanding situations that are entangled in the history of the school form (Silva & Castro, 2011, p. 211).

Silva (2013, p. 218) considers that, in the teaching knowledge taught at Santa Catarina's Normal School, the furniture stood out as a school device due to its comfort and hygiene. Along with Castro, the author argues that,

[...] although in private life or in public scenes, chairs could be related to comfort and social status, in the school scene, they did not have the same role. Benches and chairs arranged spaces and subjects within a delimited universe. In the school, table and chair found a singular force that transformed them into objects with a direct action on body hygiene, on discipline, on comfort, and on learning. They were

perpetuated as a fundamental object for good teaching. Some of them, however, gained a real space in teaching when they became necessary as a support for writing, since, up until then, one was primarily taught how to read (Silva & Castro, 2011, p. 209).

These historiographical arguments about the school materiality of the desk and about the school body and discipline are essential to analyzing the two articles by Pacífico Pereira referring to school hygiene in Bahia's schools, focusing on the perception of his frank dispute over knowledge with those in charge of instruction in the province. I also emphasize his presence as a medical "specialist" in the commission regarding this artifact in the Board of Public Instruction, in 1881.

After this delimitation, an important reading to direct my gaze was the recent thesis by Gustavo Rugoni de Sousa (2019), centered on the (re)invention of the nineteenth-century school furniture in Santa Catarina. The researcher's main hypothesis is that specific school furniture was built to equip the classrooms of public primary schools in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, amid the tensions surrounding the expansion of mass schooling, impacted by compulsory education, which was supported by three pillars: pedagogy, hygiene, and economy. These fundamentals constituted ideas and practices of pedagogical and hygienist modernization that circulated in internationalized models.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, it was observed that school furniture came to be at the center of debates and to be articulated with a political-educational project aimed at making the school a model device capable of instructing the less well-off classes and teaching habits and conduct that were aligned with the desired civility.

In this way, speeches and arguments that circulated internationally contributed to a type of furniture considered ideal starting to be manufactured in several countries and being recognized as one of the symbols of modern education, which allowed identifying the (re)invention of its senses and meanings (Sousa, 2019, p. 15).

This investigation takes up the "pedagogical modernity" category, so dear to the more classic works of Clarice Nunes (1996) and Carlos Monarcha (1999), focused on the first-republic period, and, for this reason, allowed me to reflect on one of the reasons for choosing the German desks: it would be a sign of modernity from the viewpoint of Pacífico Pereira, who had taken medical-training trips to Germany and

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<sup>5</sup> I consider the perspective it presents of the internationalization of ideas and pedagogical hygienic projects to be important; however, I did not use it in this article, as the sources to which I have access do not give me the certainty of the evidence of this process.

Scotland, where he became closer to matters related to the classroom space and children's health, such as myopia.

The text by Alcantara (2014) about the school desk being an economic vector is close to this focus, as it dynamizes the demands of manufacturing, purchase and consumption in the places where classes and schools are installed in São Paulo, also from a perspective of circulation of knowledge and practices. I was very interested in the author's classification of the subjects involved in this incorporation/circulation process based on the notion of cultural mediators, providing me with new possibilities to reflect on the social places of the subjects involved as social actors.

Thus, I began to perceive Pacifico Pereira, the hygienist physician, as the cultural traveler; Antonio Bahia da Silva and Elias Nazareth, teachers specialized in pedagogy and teaching methods, as cultural mediators and translators of the nineteenth-century pedagogical modernity; Romualdo Barroso, instruction director, as the public administrator; and Tiburcio Jezler, the merchant who intermediated the purchases of the German desks, as the one who activated internal and external commercial relations to create the physical, concrete conditions of purchase (Alcantara, 2014). In her own words,

It is necessary to know how the desks on display at the Universal and National Exhibitions reached schools in São Paulo. At first, they arrived via import and, for that, public and school administrators used travelers, cultural mediators and translators (commercial representatives and agents, importing houses) (Alcantara, 2014, p. 37).

Then, at the confluence of the investigation into commercial relations in the incorporation, dissemination, and choice of school desks, I read Souza and Silva (2019). The text refers to the subjects, the uses, and the making of school furniture artifacts as possibilities for investigating the school materiality, which involves teachers, administrators, local artisans, manufacturing institutions, and forms of uses, with which the consulted sources are in line. Based on these propositions, I divided this article into two sections, in addition to the Introduction and the Further Considerations. In the first, I deal with "School Furniture" as being an expression of school knowledge and tensions in dispute and an indication of how the provision of school furniture consolidated itself as a concern in Bahia's public instruction. In the second section, I address the purchase orders for new school desks in 1881, the "German desks", with a view to revealing the dialogue and tension with physicians prescribing hygienist precepts in the school materiality.



## MATERIAL SCHOOL CULTURE AND CHANGES BETWEEN TEACHING METHODS

I emphasize that the “requests” and “needs” here are the records of demands from male and female teachers on different matters. I am interested in those regarding objects that should be supplied by the Government, such as school furniture.

Referring to Bahia’s provincial public schools and their furniture, Sousa (2020, p. 111-112) analyzed these needs and requests between 1870 and 1890 and evidenced a lack of various “utensils”, beyond *stricto sensu* furniture, such as benches, chairs, desks. According to the author, in the early 1870s<sup>6</sup>, when the prescribed teaching method continued to be the mutual one, the absence of slate boards and sandboxes for writing was visible; benches and stools for monitors; table and platform for the teacher. Which matches the information provided by teachers who mentioned having bought the most necessary items with personal resources. This experience was also lived in other provinces, as analyzed by Souza and Silva (2019) and Alcântara (2014).

The emergence of a concept of “school furniture” is evident in official letters; said furniture should be adapted to the ages and bodies of both male and female students, ideally children under 13 and over 7 years old, expressing a new sensitivity regarding the school child body. For Gondra (2003) and Sousa (2019), this sensitivity about adequacy to the school body, school age, schooled child body, developed throughout the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is evident in repeated complaints about “chairs without symmetry and with irregular shapes”.

In a text about the emergence of the school desk as a support for writing in Santa Catarina, Silva and Castro (2011) indicated this perception of inadequacy of the classroom furniture in terms of symmetry and harmony. Similarly, Wiara Alcântara and Gustavo Rugoni Sousa also refer to the criticisms made regarding the shape of school desks in São Paulo and Santa Catarina, when talking about the networks of internationalization and marketing of these objects, and about the hygienist propositions for their constitution.

Also, when writing this article, I deemed it important to pay attention to the moral and aesthetic value placed on school furniture, which re-hierarchized school spaces, taking as indecent the conditions of disharmony and inelegance in the furniture of a school located in a parish in downtown Salvador, Bahia’s capital city. This sensitivity, once again, brings me back to the fact problematized by Silva and Castro (2011) as to the shifts in the meanings and uses of school furniture aligned with the very complexity of the acts of teaching to write, as a social skill, in this period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

An indication, in Bahia, was the prescription, in the 1873 Regulation, for “calligraphy” to be taught at the two normal schools of the province, through the practice of repeating exercises via letter models, such as “Calligraphy especially

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<sup>6</sup> In 1873, a new regulation made the “simultaneous method” official. In 1881, the intuitive method.

applied to the English letter, in exercises on italic, cursive and gothic letters” (Carvalho, 1873, p. S1-14). Another hint about teaching to write and the new sensitivities related to schoolchildren is presented in the article written by the physician Pacífico Pereira, when the author talks about the ideal dimensions of a classroom and their consequences on breathing/ventilation, myopia, and the diseases of a schooled child's body:

As for the position in the act of writing, the distance between the table and the eyes should be about 25 centimeters (10 inches approximately; it is rare for the commission to find a child who could write keeping their eyes at this distance from the paper.

For many, it was necessary to bring their face 7 centimeters closer to the writing notebook. The general conclusion of the commission and of Teacher Pfluger is that, of all the listed evils, the worst and the one that requires the most urgent reform is that which comes from the school tables and benches that are currently used (Pereira, 1883, p. 515).

However, from the content of the “official letters”, “requests” and “needs” sent by the teachers and school inspectors until the end of the provincial period, few concrete changes were made regarding the provision of school furniture and other school materiality utensils. However, I believe that the repeated requests to citizens for them to donate furniture as a way of exercising their citizenship is worthy of attention, which is expressed in various contexts and types of official documents, corroborating what Souza and Silva (2019) analyzed in relation to the subjects involved in the manufacturing and trading of the school materiality.

The request was accepted by the municipal council of the São Vicente Ferrer de Areia village, which took upon itself the work of making furniture for the girl's school in 1880, as recorded in an official letter sent to the Board of Public Instruction (Barroso, 1882). In Salvador, teacher Antônio Bahia da Silva Araújo, chair of the boy's program at Curato da Sé, in the central region of the capital, furnished his classroom, using his own resources, with American-style desks in 1878/1879, as they were considered adequate to the simultaneous method.

In 1882, said teacher, Antônio Bahia, was praised as an exemplary educator for choosing and purchasing school desks for the men's normal day school, in an agreement signed with the provincial government<sup>7</sup>. This school furniture assembled

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<sup>7</sup> In 1881, teacher Antônio Bahia da Silva Araújo chaired the Teaching Methods program at the Men's Normal School and had Malaquias Perminio Leite as his substitute – a third-grade teacher, a Black man, an award-winning master student, who, while still a learner, translated and adapted Count Zaba's method for History teaching.<sup>7</sup>

by teacher Antônio Bahia is yet another trace in the investigation on the transition between school desks made in the prison house with labor and those made by private artisans *versus* the desks coming from abroad, especially from two nations: the United States of America and Germany.

I am pleased to announce to Your Excellency that the current teacher of pedagogy at the men's normal establishment, Antonio Bahia Silva Araujo, one of the most talented and erudite members of the province's teaching staff, is responsible for the creation of the school I have just mentioned. The choice of material was entirely his own, which proves his knowledge of the progress of education in more advanced countries; and, as Your Excellency will see from Mr. Councilor Viscount of Paranagua's report, said teacher requested, and was granted by Honorable Messrs. Councilor Baron Homem de Mello and Baron of São Francisco, permission to receive from Europe and the United States the essential material, at the expense of the province, but with a monthly discount of the tenth part of his wage, as the government decided to settle, in view of the offer it was made (Dantas, 1882, p. 20).

The official letters from the teachers in the 1880s reveal that the tensions in the use of furniture intensified over the course of this period. Most of those sent by the teachers were against the new requirements regarding the officialization of the simultaneous method, with the lessons on things, civility, and the intuitive model. They were, in a sense, refusals in the face of the dissemination of new perceptions of classroom, of the uses of utensils, which created new sensitivities and "necessities" in teaching, as highlighted by Silva (2013, p. 220):

We already have enough knowledge to perceive that this is not a disinterested concern, as it indicates an education of the body that will differentiate the school subject in the public scene: upright body, measured movements, and focused gaze are aspects that make up a student's body hexis, a theme held dear by Michel Foucault.

However, they also reveal the forms and decisions as to the making of school furniture, the lack of it, the expenses of Public Instruction, the tensions and disputes between those who made and who bought the school furniture, as analyzed by Souza and Silva (2019), Sousa (2019) and Alcântara (2014), which I present in the next section, based on the imbroglio of the German desks of 1882.

## TENSIONS IN THE SUPPLY OF SCHOOL DESKS: FROM THE AMERICAN TO THE GERMAN ONES

During the 1880s, few letters from teachers and from Literary Commissions were found not complaining about the lack of school utensils, especially furniture. In this sense, President João dos Reis de Souza Dantas, a liberal politician, in 1882, referred to “school supplies” as being of fundamental importance.

School supplies are as necessary in the house where first instruction is provided, as the instruments required for a factory to operate.

To deny it is to not want teaching to take place (Dantas, 1882, p. 19).

He then reported on the purchase of new school desks, ordered in 1881, by the previous government, giving an explanation to the opposition in the provincial assembly and expressing his concern about the resistance that this purchase was suffering:

Due to the request of the worthy general director of public instruction, Mr. Councilor Viscount of Paranaguá authorized the purchase, in the country or abroad, in the most economical way and in accordance with the teaching requirements, of furniture for the capital's primary schools; the current pieces that furnish said schools will be sent to the schools on the coast, and the pieces currently furnishing the latter, to the center of the province. It was the right measure: ‘to lessen the evil, as much as possible, in the current circumstances’ (Dantas, 1882, p. 16, emphasis added).

In the citation, the hierarchy between the central/outer areas in the provisions for the schools is evident; see the circulation of material between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> class schools in the capital itself, as well as those located inside the province, a 1<sup>st</sup> class one. This circulation of furniture is also highlighted in the official letters written by teachers who inherited the old furniture, as well as those who gave it away after having received new one. However, the number of primary public schools with furniture, especially the desired desks, remained scarce. This was a common experience in some other provinces, as shown in research by Alcantara (2014), Sousa (2019) and Souza and Silva (2019).

But what was the new furniture that came to replace the “old system” of the locally made bench? The director of instruction, Romualdo Barroso, expressed the delimitation of two moments in the making of this school furniture. A new one, the time of scientific desks. And a prior one, the “time of the artisans”, to which he referred in a derogatory manner, regarding the personal skill of the “artist”. His censorship focused on the alleged lack of medical-hygienist knowledge in the artist's

technique, in their “know-how”, when using the expression “without consulting, however, the prescriptions of science”.

#### SCHOOL MATERIAL

That there is an absolute lack of pieces of furniture in almost all schools in the capital is an indisputable fact.

Here they are, to prove it, in addition to the repeated complaints produced (by the press, the reports of the directors of the normal schools and those of the commissions that will examine the primary schools, and countless letters that this board receives every day, whether from the presidents of the literary commissions and parishes, whether from the teachers themselves.

The few that exist in some schools cannot serve the purpose for which they were intended.

For school furniture to be prepared, a price list would be sent to the artist in charge of the work, without the necessary explanations.

He would follow his natural inspiration. If he were skilled, he would prepare a more or less beautiful work, without consulting, however, the prescriptions of science (Barroso, 1882, p. 64-65).

He informed that he had gone to the carpentry workshops held at the prison house with labor, which, since the 1860s, provided this service (Souza, 2020; Souza & Silva, 2019), to order desks with medical-hygienist dimensions, of the Lenoir model, the attitude of a school administrator representing the government, but also as a cultural translator of the new hygienist-pedagogical models and concepts, according to the categorization used by Alcantara (2014). On the occasion, he took a personally chosen model of school chair.

At the prison house with labor, I ordered a chair based on the Neuchâtel model of Dr. Guilherme, which should be made in accordance with the dimensions of the furniture (Lenoir system) found in the school attached to the men’s day school. I do not know why the artist did not strictly follow the instructions he was given.

In addition to the ordered desk, he presented another desk, which he made on his own initiative, an imitation of the American model (Barroso, 1882, p. 69).

Based on the results of the investigative commission on the teaching conditions of the first<sup>8</sup> fiscal district of the Capital, he stated that, among the problems detected, the desks stood out, even as a failure in school hygiene. Thus, he defended the replacement of the “old benches”, due to their “inconveniences”, especially the lack of backrests. This absence did not meet the rational requirements of adequacy of the school child body, an argument found in the historiography referring to other provinces in the country:

‘If we take into account the condition of the furniture’, says the examining commission of the 1<sup>st</sup> district in its report, ‘we will see that it is in complete disagreement with the rules of hygiene. Even today, the old benches known as desks are still used in most schools, where children are forced to sit for hours studying, without a support on which they can rest their back muscles; and due to the forced position in which they stay, they see themselves stuck into vicious attitudes, without respect for the rational conditions of the stature of each one of them, bearing in mind that the conditions of the benches on which they have to study must also vary according to said stature’ (Barroso, 1882, p. 65, emphasis added).

In his writing, the use of specific terms of morphology, physiology, and anatomy is evident, in addition to medical semiotics. These terms are signs of the intersectionality between teaching knowledge and the medical-hygienist knowledge from the period:

‘However, it is now clearly demonstrated that the irrational conditions of school furniture result in serious inconveniences for the health of children: - nosebleeds, spinal deviations, intense headaches, goiter, eye diseases, digestive disturbances’ (Barroso, 1882, p. 65, emphasis added).

This medical-pedagogical intersectionality was the basis for the commission to issue an opinion on the purchase of new school desks in 1881. The commission was made up of three teachers from the men’s normal day school: Joaquim José da Palma, director; Antônio Bahia da Silva Araújo, teacher of Pedagogy, chair of Teaching Methods; and Elias Figueredo Nazareth, chair of Teaching Methods. In addition to those were the well-known Dr. Pacífico Pereira and the physician Francisco dos Santos Pereira.

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<sup>8</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> District was comprised of the parishes of Sé, São Pedro, Sant’Anna, Rua do Passo and Vitoria, all in the upper, and not directly commercial, part of the capital.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of October, I appointed a commission of teachers to issue an opinion on these chairs, whether they should be adopted in our schools, whether they needed modifications and which ones, etc. The distinguished staff members Dr. Pacifico Pereira and Dr. Francisco dos Santos Pereira, by my invitation, will provide the commission with the valuable help of their lights. On the 25<sup>th</sup>, they came to this office and, after examining the desks, declared to me that they had no use as school furniture. By the proposal of one of the members of the commission, they decided to design a model with a table of dimensions for the construction of benches and desks for the schools in the Province (Barroso, 1882, p. 69).

The commission members also rejected the piece made by the “artist”, master of the carpenters’ workshop at the prison house with labor. For this reason, they presented a hygienist-pedagogical proposal, as evidenced by the 1882 Report:

BAHIA, MARCH 1, 1882.- Most Eminent Mr- The undersigned commission, assigned by Your Lordship with the task of presenting a school furniture system that meets all the conditions required by hygiene, submits to your illustrious consideration the included model, accompanied by a table and the indications that must be observed for the desks and benches intended for the public primary schools of this Province (Barroso, 1882, p. 69).

The commission sent a set of guidelines consisting of a desk model, a table of dimensions, and other instructions, in consonance with what occurred in other provinces in Brazil (Souza, 2019; Alcantara; 2014).

Instructions for the making of the school tables and benches

1<sup>st</sup> The table and the bench must form a single piece.

2<sup>nd</sup> Each piece must fit two students only.

3<sup>rd</sup> Each seat must be at least 45 centimeters long for smaller ones, and 50 centimeters for bigger ones.

4<sup>th</sup> The greatest difference in height between boys sitting on the same bench must not exceed 15 centimeters.

5<sup>th</sup> The benches must be wide enough for the buttocks and 3/5 of the thighs to rest on them.

6<sup>th</sup> The height of the seats must be such that, with the student seated, their legs and thighs form a right angle, and the sole of their feet rests on the floor.

7<sup>th</sup> The benches must have a convex backrest, so as to provide comfortable support to the lumbar curve of the spine.

8<sup>th</sup> The backrest must have a height that allows the boys, while resting their elbows on it, to relieve, for a few moments, the lower part of the trunk from the body weight it supports.

9<sup>th</sup> The horizontal distance between the front edge of the table and the bench must be null.

10<sup>th</sup> The board of the table must have an inclination of 15°, and be divided longitudinally, so that the anterior part can be lifted, in order for the boys to be able, when necessary, to stand up between the table and the bench.

11<sup>th</sup> And each piece of school furniture will have at least five different dimensions for the statures corresponding to the ages of 6 to 15 years.

12<sup>th</sup> For the making of the school furniture, the dimensions of the attached table will be adopted (Barroso, 1882, p. 70).

The opinion issuers set the dimensions for the making of the furniture, dividing the students into five classes, based on their height, according to articles 11 and 12 of the opinion. Supported by said opinion, the general director decided to place an order for school chairs from Germany, after a special request for the release of funds to the President of the Province, Councilor Cunha Paranaguá.

What would be more advantageous? Preparing the furniture right here, or order it from abroad?

Still having no settled idea about it, and since it was urgent to inform the requirement of that merchant, I asked the honorable predecessor of Your Excellency that this board would be deemed worthy to acquire the furniture and other necessary utensils for the primary schools in the capital, as well as for the two normal houses. Having them prepared in the country, or ordering them in Europe, whatever the most economical and advantageous way.

Your Excellency, for an act of trust, which renders me very honored, granted me the requested authorization (Barroso, 1882, p. 72).



Merchant Tiburcio Jezler served as intermediary, identified in an *Almanaque Estado da Bahia* record (1910) as a party acting in the “Haberdashery” sector and located in the parish of Sé. This businessman offered his services before the commission’s opinion, pointing to what was problematized by Alcantara (2014), Veiga (2018) and Souza and Silva (2019), with regard to the relationships between economy and commerce, institutional political world and school materiality,

About seven months before receiving the official letter from the Commission, the Presidency of the Province had been requested the provision of the school material by the honorable businessman from our community, Tiburcio Jezler, forcing him to have it sent from Germany (Barroso, 1882, p. 71).

It was not a doubtless decision, especially regarding the high amount of disbursement, around twenty-five *contos de réis*. “As Your Excellency will see from said contract, the cost stands at 44,935 *marcos*. Based on today’s exchange rate that regulates our currency, 20  $\frac{3}{4}$ , 25:478\$145” (Barroso, 1882, p. 75). With regard to the way he acted, unfortunately, he did not mention in the report who the people he consulted with were:

After listening to knowledgeable and judicious people, considering that it would be more advantageous, due to the price, due to the perfection of the work, to order the furniture from Europe, I signed the contract with merchant Tiburcio Jazler, which Your Excellency has just approved in an official letter of the 24<sup>th</sup> of this month (Barroso, 1882, p. 72).

Thus, the wording of the contract registered the risks for both sides. On the merchant’s side, those referring to delivery, delay, conditions, material, etc. Regarding this issue, I highlight the caput:

#### CONTRACT

On the 18<sup>th</sup> day of March 1882, in this city of São Salvador, Bahia de Todos os Santos, the office of the board of public instruction, where Mr. Canon Dr. Romualdo Maria de Seixas Barroso was present, received Tiburcio Jazler in order to sign the following contract.

The contracting party is obliged:

1<sup>st</sup>

To have the following pieces of furniture sent from Berlin, manufactured by A. Lickroth and C, for the prices determined on the catalog found in the general board of public instruction, with only the value of the *marco* varying, in accordance with exchange rate oscillations: [...] (Barroso, 1882, p. 72).

The government was left with, in addition to the payment, criticism for the high expense and, probably, the displeasure of the disgruntled local “artists” and of the administration of the prison house with labor, which did not receive the traditional order, as well as of the local chair merchants. Moral accusations existed, as evidenced by his writing:

#### SCHOOL MATERIAL

One of the urgent needs of primary education in this province is, in part, happily satisfied – school material.

Thanks to the authorization given to me by Eminent Mr. Councilor Paranaguá, the two normal houses and the primary schools of the capital will be provided with select material coming from Germany.

The contract signed with merchant Tiburcio Jezler gave rise to the most unfounded accusations on the part of the opposition press in this land.

They hurt the pride of men and the dignity of civil servants.

I energetically repelled the injuries thrown at me. By the mercy of God, I will leave this place with a calm conscience and my head lifted (Barroso, 1883, p. 36).

The delivery of a first batch of school desks, consisting of a chair and a bench, is recorded in the 1884 report and indicted in letters from the teacher of the boy's class in the parish of Conceição, Benvimdo Barbosa, who would receive them in 1883. They were privileged classes, as little changed in the others. The German desks furnished the two normal day schools, both Men's and Women's, equally. Based on the information, I prepared Table 1, displayed below.

**Table 1** - First batch of German school desks in 1884

Material	Men's normal school	Women's normal school
Drawing bench	14	14
Simple bench	28	28
Teacher desks	3	3

Source: Prepared by the author, from Barroso (1884, p. 24-25).

As for the existing furniture, be it desks or the more traditional benches, the 1884 report informs that they were redistributed in the other classrooms of the parishes in the capital. Evidence is the 1883 letter by teacher Bemvindo Alves Barbosa, from the parish of Conceição da Praia. Eager to receive the “modern furniture”, he went to the director of instruction and was told to reach out to his inspector, referred to at the top of the letter, a custom of Canon Romualdo Barroso, as highlighted in italics and bold fonts.

Bahia and men's primary public school in the parish of Conceição da Praia, May 14, 1883.

*[ ] must come into an agreement with Dr. Inspector Litt, to whom precise information was given.*

Most Honorable Mr.

Being about to receive the modern furniture, which will replace the old system, in the school, under my regency, I need to consult Your Lordship as to what destination should I give the abovementioned, since I do not have space in the house that could accommodate it, so it must be given away as soon as the new one arrives (Barbosa, 1883).

With regard to further evidence of school furniture being sent to the inner parts of the province, whether on the coast, center, or hinterland, I found no records, except for the Cachoeira and Maragogipe towns, in the sugar region, where the provincial wealth was concentrated. The old wooden benches were sent to the suburban parishes of the capital, such as Paripe.

Due to the contract signed between this board and the merchant Tiburcio Jezler, the following pieces of furniture were received: [...]

The furniture specified above were distributed as follows:

In replacement of the old furniture removed from the capital's schools, the 1<sup>st</sup> men's school in the city of Cachoeira and the 2<sup>nd</sup> boy's school in the city of Maragogipe will receive American desks. I sent some of the desks made in the country to the girl's schools in Paripe and Olaria. The other ones that can be used will be distributed in due course (Barroso, 1884, p. 24).

However, teachers' official letters, near the end of the Empire, 1888/1889, as well as from the early years of the Republic onwards, evidence that the lack of school furniture continued. Moreover, they show the difficulties in implementing the proposed and officially prescribed teaching method, the intuitive one, as well as other school practices linked to this lack of school materiality.

## FINAL REMARKS

In this article, I aimed to analyze some of the relationships between the materiality of school desks and the teaching and medical-hygienist knowledge, based on episodes marked by the attempt to replace the current school desks in normal schools and in some public schools, relying on the opinion of a bipartite commission composed of teachers who were specialists in teaching methods, and physicians who presented themselves as specialists in Hygiene, particularly as advocates for the implementation of hygiene in schools. Concomitantly with this objective, the sources used evidenced, first, the existence of subjects who worked in the interface with the field of educational activities, especially doctors, corroborating with the existing historiography for other provinces, such as São Paulo, Santa Catarina and Paraná, whose research forms the historiographical basis of my work.

Additionally, I believe that the practice of composing mixed commissions of teachers and physicians to issue specialized opinions has become evident, pointing to the constitution of bodies of recognized experts, that is, pedagogists and hygienists. Furthermore, as I discussed, besides the desks designed in the United States, there were those made by local "artists", including from the prison house with labor, which traditionally received orders from the provincial government, which is also in line with existing research on the diversity of subjects and interests in the constitution of the school materiality. There are indications that the episode created moral displeasure and political pressure against the director of instruction.

Another issue that became prominent was the practice of citizen donations for the execution of school projects, such as the construction of buildings and the making of furniture, in addition to records on the multiplicity of its formats, the presence of subjects in the design, making and uses of artifacts, the circulation of new and old furniture, the constitution of aesthetic sensitivities related to class and the social place in that society marked by categories of color/race. This perception of the multiplicity of subjects and social spaces where public classes were installed broadens the possibilities of intersectionality with matters of race and class, so present in the nineteenth-century Bahia, still involved in the slave trade, by allowing us to ask: who attended classes in the most distant parishes? Who were the teachers? For instance, of the three teachers of teaching methods at the men's normal day school between

1881 and 1882, two were black. By the classification at the time, Elias Nazareth, who was brown, and Malaquias Perminio Leite, who was black.

Another possibility is to investigate the emergence of new sensitivities in school hygienism based on other publications and actions by physicians and their consequences in publications in journals for normal-school students, in *Gazeta Médica* itself, in doctoral theses, or even in the very constitution of School Hygiene and Pediatrics as a medical-pedagogical field. Also because, as Marcus Bencostta teaches (2020, p. 336), it is necessary “[...] to tension this relationship between the hygienist movement and the pedagogical requirements in the adoption of idealized models of school furniture, since children’s hygiene was not always the main concern of those who designed school furniture”.

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