



## History of reading instruction in Brasil and 19th-century syllabaries

História do ensino da leitura no Brasil e os silabários do século XIX

Historia de la enseñanza de la lectura en Brasil y los silabarios del siglo XIX

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze schoolbooks produced and/or distributed in Brazil in the 19th century, called syllabaries, comparing them to understand their graphic devices and the ideas about reading instruction that they propagated. To this end, an inventory of these printed materials was initially carried out in the sources of the *Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira*, seeking, in addition to the titles, the definitions and typical representations of a syllabary in Brazil. Next, an analysis was carried out of three Brazilian syllabaries located in their entirety in the collections of the *Casa de Rui Barbosa* and the *Biblioteca Nacional*, both in Rio de Janeiro, investigating their authors, their materiality and the reading instruction methods proposed. This study seeks to contribute to the history of reading instruction in Brazil, understanding the specificities of the editorial production of syllabaries and the way in which these materials envisioned reading instruction practices in the 19th century context.

**Keywords:** History of literacy; 19th century; Syllabary.

## Resumo

Este trabalho tem como objetivo analisar os livros escolares produzidos e/ou divulgados no Brasil no século XIX, intitulados de silabários, cotejando-os para compreensão de seus dispositivos gráficos e dos ideários sobre o ensino de leitura que propagavam. Para tanto, inicialmente realizou-se um inventário desses impressos nas fontes da Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira, buscando, além dos títulos, as definições e representações típicas de um silabário no Brasil. Em seguida, procedeu-se à análise de três silabários brasileiros localizados em sua integralidade nos acervos da Casa de Rui Barbosa e da Biblioteca Nacional, ambos no Rio de Janeiro, investigando seus autores, sua materialidade e os métodos de ensino da leitura propostos. Almejou-se, com esse estudo, contribuir para a história do ensino de leitura no Brasil, compreendendo as especificidades da produção editorial dos silabários e a maneira como esses materiais vislumbravam práticas de ensino de leitura no contexto oitocentista.

**Palavras-chave:** História da alfabetização; Século XIX; Silabário.

## Resumen

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar los libros escolares producidos y/o divulgados en Brasil en el siglo XIX, denominados silabarios, comparándolos para comprender sus dispositivos gráficos y los idearios sobre lectura que propagaban. Para ello, inicialmente se realizó un inventario de estas impresiones en las fuentes de la Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira, buscando, además de los títulos, las definiciones y representaciones típicas de un silabario en Brasil. Luego, se procedió al análisis de tres silabarios brasileños localizados en su totalidad en los archivos de la Casa de Rui Barbosa y de la Biblioteca Nacional, ambos en Río de Janeiro, investigando sus autores, su materialidad y los metodos de enseñanza de la lectura propuestos. Con este estudio se buscó contribuir a la historia de la enseñanza de la lectura en Brasil, comprendiendo las especificidades de la producción editorial de los silabarios y la manera en que estos materiales visualizaban las prácticas de enseñanza de la lectura en el contexto del siglo XIX.

**Palabras clave:** Historia de la alfabetización; Siglo XIX; Silabario.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Notably since the 19th century, the discourse on the need for an ideal method for teaching literacy, embodied in a printed form, led to the expansion of the production of schoolbooks and their becoming a promising area for writers and booksellers. The trade in educational works, compared to that of other literary genres, was much broader, leading authors to seek in the writing of schoolbooks a means of earning a living. Hallewell (2012), in his classic study on the history of books in Brazil, shows that many bookstores and publishers, in the 19th century, managed to survive thanks to investment in the publication and sale of schoolbooks, a growing commercial sector. In fact, an analysis of the catalogs of bookstores and publishers of the time reveals that textbooks accounted for a large part of their publications, especially in the second half the 19th century and early 20th century, when the need for specific materials aimed at teaching school subjects became widespread (Batista, Galvão, Klinke, 2002; Tambara, 2002; Hallewell, 2012; Razzini, 2014; Bragança, 2016).

Throughout history, books aimed at the Portuguese language subject in Brazil, particularly for the initial teaching of reading and writing or literacy, have received various names, the best known being: alphabet, *artinha*, letter, ABC letter, syllable letter, name letter, outside letter, letter, primer, syllabary, pre-book, first reading book, first letter book, reading book, textbook, literacy book, etc. Although they had characteristics that brought them together, each of these names had specificities that differentiated and made them unique in the Brazilian publishing market in each historical period. It is worth noting that some designations were replaced or even fell into disuse, as they were associated with the “traditional” teaching of reading and writing. The most emblematic case is the use of the word “*cartilha*” in the titles of books intended for literacy in the late 20th century.

With the advent of psychogenetic studies to understand how children appropriated written language, which became popularly known as “constructivist theory,” and the debates surrounding the uses and social functions of language, based on what was called “literacy,” the *cartilhas* and their contents were criticized. Frade and Maciel (2006) explain that, in the 1990s, different policies for controlling textbooks emerged in Brazil; In 1996, the federal government “inaugurated another policy of regulation, evaluation and purchase of literacy books” and, as a result, “several books [for literacy] that had been part of a kind of pedagogical tradition until that moment were no longer purchased and recommended, especially for public schools” (Frade; Maciel, 2006, p. 17-18). In view of this, naming a book as a “*cartilha*” became synonymous with something traditional, archaic and obsolete, and the term began to be removed from the titles of the works.

In recent years, much research has been done on literacy primers, and they have been a source and/or object of studies with great prominence among research on the history of Brazilian literacy (Cardoso, Amâncio, 2018; Dias, Cardoso, 2024). In comparison, other printed materials aimed at early reading and writing instruction, such as ABC cards, alphabet books, and syllabaries, have been less explored, either due to the difficulty in accessing these sources or due to the challenge of accurately characterizing them within the history of schooling (Frade, 2010a; Peres, 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Professors Francisca Maciel and Marcia Razzini for their dialogue about the content of this article at various points during its production. However, I am solely responsible for the content. I would like to thank Professor Eduardo Arriada for providing images of some pages of the *Primeiro Livro de Leitura (Silabário)*, by Hilário Ribeiro. I would like to thank the *Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa*, which provided the digital version of the work *Syllabario nacional ou novo methodo para aprender a ler*, by Antonio de Araujo Ferreira Jacobina, for the collaboration of Leonardo Pereira da Cunha (Library Technician). I would also like to thank researchers Adriana Valentim Beaklini and Patricia Telles, who helped us to get in touch with the materiality of this work.

Therefore, in this article, in particular, the investigation focuses on syllabaries, published in Brazil or abroad in the 19th century, which circulated in Brazilian schools and were published in the country's press. Regarding this theme, it is important to clarify two points. The first concerns what research on schoolbooks strongly demonstrates: there was a wide circulation of books by Portuguese authors in home or school education in the 19th century in Brazil (Vojniak, 2014). The second point concerns the period chosen, the 19th century, to demarcate our research. It was in this century that the production of literacy books written by Brazilian authors or foreigners naturalized in the country expanded (Mortatti, 2000; Valdez, Panizzolo, Dias, Rocha, 2023, 2025).

To this end, the work assumed the objective of analyzing the schoolbooks produced and/or distributed in Brazil in the 19th century, called syllabaries, comparing them to understand their graphic devices and the ideas about the teaching of reading that they propagated. The sources analyzed were obtained through an extensive survey in the *Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira da Biblioteca Nacional*, in whose collection of periodicals we tracked all occurrences of the terms “*syllabario*” and “*syllabarios*”. In research carried out between May and July 2024, approximately 1,451 occurrences were found using these filters, detailed in the following table.

**Table 1.** Occurrences for the terms “*syllabario*” and “*syllabarios*” in a search conducted between May and July 2024 in the *Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira da Biblioteca Nacional*

Periods	Occurrences
1800-1809	0
1810-1819	3
1820-1829	3
1830-1839	8
1840-1849	10
1850-1859	116
1860-1869	176
1870-1879	425
1880-1889	247
1890-1899	463
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.451</b>

**Source:** Prepared by the author.

After a careful reading of all these occurrences, they were organized in this article into two main sections following this introduction. In the first section, we sought to identify not only the titles of the syllabaries published by the Brazilian press, but also the definitions and representations about this book. That said, based on the survey of the syllabaries, an in-person search was carried out in the collection of the National Library, in Rio de Janeiro, in August 2024, in search of some of these inventoried titles, in which the following printed works were identified: *Syllabario ou primeiro livro de leitura*, by Manuel Ribeiro de Almeida (1875) and *Primeiro livro de leitura: Syllabario*, by João Braz da Silveira Caldeira (1877). Previously, through contact with the *Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa*, located in Rio de Janeiro, we obtained the digitalized version of the work *Syllabario nacional ou novo methodo para aprender a ler*, by Antonio de Araujo Ferreira Jacobina (1883). These three works supported our analyses in the second topic of this article, so that, based on their content and materiality, we analyzed the ideas that circulated about teaching reading.

## Syllabaries of the 19th century: a brief mapping

The contact with these sources allowed us to note, as Frade (2010a, p. 276) explains, that a syllabary can be “(i) a type of book; (ii) a table or set of tables with varied syllabic series, presented within the pages of a book; (iii) a method for teaching literacy”. In the periodical press of the 19th century, we confirmed what the author had already clarified in her work: this terminology was often used in a generic way to refer to any book for teaching reading, in a way that it was not necessarily associated with the title of the work.

Regarding these first definitions of syllabaries, it was possible to verify in the sources that this nomenclature became common in the titles of books aimed at teaching reading in the 19th century. In this paper, we focused on carrying out an inventory and analyzing these types of printed material. On the other hand, books published under other titles but which included a section entitled “Syllabary” were not included in the analysis, as is the case of the work by Camillo Trinocq (1851), popularly advertised as *Primeiro Livro de Leitura*.

This book was probably first published in 1851 by the Garnier brothers’ bookstore with a more comprehensive title: *Curso d’estudos elementares – Collecção de Tratados separados, contem as mais uties sobre dos principaes ramos de conhecimento humana. Primeiro Livro de Leitura*. In the 1865 catalogue of the Baptiste Louis Garnier bookstore, the aforementioned printed material is described as being divided into parts, with each of them having subsections that lead the student to knowledge without tiring (Livraria de B. L. Garnier, 1865, p. 10). The work, intended for parents or teachers, has the first part entitled “Syllabary”. In the book’s initial warnings, the author explains that, in this section, vowels are taught, then syllables with consonants, gradually increasing the difficulty of syllabic combinations. According to Trinocq (1851), the learner moves from syllables to words; from words to sentences and from these to “running reading”. He warns that he presents “first, the words divided into syllables with dashes; then, in the last lesson, without any dividing sign” (Trinocq, 1851, p. X). This visual form of reading lessons arranged with hyphens, initially separating syllables, then being removed in the last lessons to lead to running reading, “is not typical of a literacy method, but related to ‘stages’ of progression in the development of reading” (Frade, 2012, p. 183). This organization of lessons, as attested by the investigations of Frade (2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2016) and Vojniak (2014), was present in the printed material of the period, being “a guide for relating oral and written text” (Frade, 2016, p. 433). In this model, words separated into syllables favored the visual recognition of students when reading the parts that made up the words to be read.

The mention of Trinocq’s work (1851) corroborates the argument that the term “syllabary”, in the composition of a book, began to be used not only to title charts or tables containing syllables, but also to specify a didactic way of organizing materials intended for teaching reading.

In his study, Frade (2010a), citing the prefaces of two works entitled “*Primeiros livros de leitura*”, one by Abilio Cesar Borges and the other by Felisberto de Carvalho, asserts that syllabaries appear “sometimes as a type of teaching to be overcome, due to the lack of meaning (Abilio); sometimes as material to be criticized; sometimes as material to be used before beginners make use of the first reading books (Felisberto de Carvalho)” (Frade, 2010a, p. 276). This discourse Borges, the Baron of Macaúbas, appears in published passages in the press, such as in 1856, when he was General Director of Studies in the Province of Bahia, in which he associated the “old method” with the use of syllabaries, considering it a “tedious, unnecessary and extremely inaccurate” book (Borges, 1856, p. 2). On the other hand, he defended the method of the Portuguese António Feliciano de Castilho, which, for Borges, was more modern. The Baron of Macaúbas was one of the propagators of the Castilho method in Brazil, whose basis was phonetics. Castilho himself, both in the preface to his work and in texts published in Portugal and in speeches broadcast in the Brazilian press on the occasion of his visit to the

country in 1855, criticized the use of syllabaries. Opposing the spelling and syllabification method, Castilho explained that he promoted a break with the tradition of teaching reading inherited from traditional syllabaries (Albuquerque, 2023).

This view that syllabaries are archaic prints and associated with spelling methods is present in several passages of the newspapers investigated in the *Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira*. These books appear in scenes from serial novels with pejorative content and related to punitive practices undertaken by the teacher. However, they are also promoted not as synonyms for backwardness or criticism, titling books or parts of them with methodological proposals that aimed to overcome the methods considered, at the time, more boring or generically called “current methods” (Vojniak, 2014). The work *Methodo de Leitura*, by Renato da Cunha, published at the end of the 19th century, for example, contains a section entitled syllabary and, as stated in the newspaper notes, “the author sought to distance himself from the methods already followed, striving to make **easy** and **smooth** ‘that which was considered so rough and so complicated in the first letters’” (Imprensa Evangelica, 1892, p. 23, our emphasis). This discourse, as we will see in more detail in the next section, was also disseminated in the works analyzed, together with the idea that books or parts of them, also called syllabaries, were in tune with the development of learning in a quick and pleasant way.

When accessing the sources, we would add that the word “syllabary” was also used to refer to a stage in the process of teaching and learning to read, as well as to describe the level of education of the student at the time of enrollment in the first-letter school or during their schooling. It was not uncommon to find references to advertisements for schools or published reports on their practices that mentioned, among the contents, the syllabary, especially for the reading initiation classes. By way of example, the *Correio da Victoria*, of the Province of Espírito Santo, in the Government Secretariat's business section, published that primary schools would be divided into three classes, with the “1st room containing students who begin with a b c until the end of the syllabary” (Correio da Victoria, 1849, p. 2). Inside the rooms, the rows of benches would be organized according to the students' level of learning.

In previous research about the history of literacy in Goiás in the 19th century (Rocha, 2019), we noted that it was common for primary school teachers in Goiás to request “syllabaries or syllable charts” from the Provincial Presidents, which leads us to understand that syllabaries were often described as “syllable charts”<sup>2</sup>, being characterized as loose materials that brought together several syllables to be taught, unlike the content of other printed materials such as ABC charts and name charts. Also in this investigation, it was found that it was common to request “ABC charts with syllabaries”, which corroborates the description of the classic composition of ABC charts, which contained “upper and lower case alphabets; syllabaries composed of segments of one, two or three letters, and finally, loose words whose syllabic segments appeared separated by a hyphen” (Corrêa; Silva, 2008, p.2).

Regarding the authorship of the syllabaries, it is important to highlight that these printed books initially circulated, as did the alphabets, catechisms and ABC letters, without reference to the author (Frade, 2010a; Stephanou, Souza, 2016). In our research in the press, we observed generic mentions about the sale of syllabaries in bookstores, without indication of authorship. Likewise, in school records, in which teachers and authorities requested or sent books to elementary schools in the nineteenth century, it is common for syllabaries to be mentioned without identification of the author, while other books intended for teaching reading already received this specification (Marcilio, 2016; Rocha, 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning that Frade (2010a, p. 276) also draws attention to the fact that the syllabary “can designate loose sheets – possibly cardboard – called ‘syllable letters’”.

Presented in different forms, we found 34 syllabaries with identified authorship, which we record in the table below. It is worth clarifying that the spelling of the names of the works and their authors was maintained as found in the historical sources.

**Chart 1.** Syllabaries published in the 19th century

Title	Author	Year
Abilio Cesar Borges/ Joaquim Abilio Borges <sup>3</sup>	<i>Livro do povo ou syllabario brasileiro</i>	1895
Alfredo Lino Maciel Azamor	<i>Syllabario Azamor</i>	1893
Antonio Cesar Ferreira Maciel	<i>Syllabario pelo methodo mixto</i>	1892
Antonio de Araujo Ferreira Jacobina	<i>Syllabario nacional ou novo methodo para aprender a ler</i>	1883
Antonio Maria Barker <sup>4</sup>	<i>Syllabario ou arte completa de ensinar a ler por methodo novo e fácil, 1st part, which deals with the most necessary syllables [...]</i>	1834
Antonio Maria Barker	<i>Syllabario, 2nd part, which deals with word lessons, displayed in two columns: the 1st with divided syllables, the 2nd without any division</i>	1834
Arthur Trajano Ubatuba	<i>Syllabario</i> <sup>5</sup>	1879
Augusto Emílio Zaluar	<i>Introdução ao Livro da infancia (Syllabario)</i>	1883
Candido José Mendes Pereira	<i>Syllabario e principios de leitura</i>	1880
Candido Matheus de Faria Parda e Vasconcellos <sup>6</sup>	<i>Novo syllabario</i>	1876
Carlos Augusto Soares Brazil	<i>Syllabario</i> <sup>7</sup>	1878
Delphina Rosa da Silva Vasconcellos <sup>8</sup>	<i>Syllabario Vasconcellino</i>	1872

<sup>3</sup> The historical sources consulted for this work attribute the authorship of the *Livro do povo or syllabário brasileiro* to Abilio Cesar Borges, the Baron of Macaúbas, to Joaquim Abilio Borges, or to both. To date, we have not been able to access the materiality of this work; however, many advertisements in the press emphasize that its authorship is exclusively that of Joaquim Borges. In this sense, we chose to reference the authorship to son and father using the slash, and not with the connective “and”, to highlight the imprecision we have about who, in fact, was the author of the syllabary in question.

<sup>4</sup> The two syllabaries by Antonio Maria Barker appear in the catalogue of Baptiste Louis Garnier's bookshop, number 20, from 1860, with the title *Alphabet or Portuguese syllabario. First part, which deals with the most necessary syllables and Alphabet or Portuguese syllabario; Second part, which deals with the word lessons set out in two columns, the first with divided syllables, and the second without any division* (Livreria de B. L. Garnier, 1860, p. 3). In another catalogue of the bookshop, number 23, from 1865, Barker's book appears with the title *Syllabario portuguez ou arte de ensinar a ler por methodo novo e fácil, 2 parts (each part is sold separately)* (Livreria de B. L. Garnier, 1865, p. 5).

<sup>5</sup> To date, it has not been possible to identify the full title of the syllabary published by Professor Arthur Trajano Ubatuba. In the Report of the General Directorate of Public Instruction, sent by Director Frederico Bier to the President of the Province of São Pedro do Rio Grande do Sul in 1879, there is a mention that the Ubatuba book was not presented in accordance with Law No. 1158, of May 23, 1878).

<sup>6</sup> The authorship of the book *Novo syllabário* is attributed to professors Parda and Vasconcellos. By cross-referencing sources, it was possible to determine that Parda is Professor Candido Matheus de Faria Parda, but we were unable to ascertain with certainty the full name of the second professor mentioned, Vasconcellos. A note published in the press states that the aforementioned syllabary was published “in accordance with the study program of the municipal schools of the court” (Gazeta de Noticias, 1876, p. 1).

<sup>7</sup> In an advertisement in the *Jornal do Commercio*, from 1878, it was stated that professor Carlos Brazil had published a syllabary more than 10 years ago, whose full title was not specified, however it stated that it was already in its 4th edition (Jornal do Commercio, 1878, p. 4).

<sup>8</sup> The only mention we found of the *Syllabario Vasconcellino* was in a note with a comment by Professor Delphina Rosa da Silva Vasconcellos about her opinion regarding primary education in the Court, in 1872, published in the appendix to the Report presented to the General Assembly (Oliveira, 1872). The professor emphasizes that she saw advantages in using the aforementioned syllabary. Could she have been the author of the material? It is worth noting the similarity between Delphina Vasconcellos' surname and the title of the publication, which leads us, hypothetically, to attribute the authorship to her. Even though we are aware of the risks we run of making mistakes, we chose to record her, since she is a woman, in order to highlight the possible presence of a female writer among the predominantly male group.

Title	Author	Year
Eduardo de Sá Pereira de Castro	<i>Syllabario</i> <sup>9</sup>	1858
Emília Augusta de Azevedo Braga	<i>Syllabario fluminense</i>	1886
Estevão dos Santos Fasciotti	<i>Syllabario</i> <sup>10</sup>	1887
Francisco de Paula Mascarenhas Junior	<i>Syllabario Mascarenhas ou jogo das syllabas</i>	1874
Francisco de Paula Soares e Frederico Adão Carlos Koeffer (Hoeffer) <sup>11</sup>	<i>Syllabario brasileiro para aprender facilmente a ler</i>	1858
Hilário Ribeiro	<i>Primeiro livro de leitura (Syllabario)</i>	1878
J. R. Galvão	<i>Syllabario portuguez, ou novo methodo para aprender a ler em breve tempo a lingua portuguesa, illustrado com numerosas estampas</i>	1879
Januário dos Santos Sabino e Estevam da Costa Cunha	<i>Primeiro livro de leitura (syllabario) por um novo systema, se aprende rapidamente a ler, tanto letra de mão como de imprensa</i>	1882
João Braz da Silveira Caldeira	<i>Primeiro livro de leitura: syllabario</i>	1877
João da Matta Araujo	<i>Syllabario</i> <sup>12</sup>	1877
João José Pereira de Azurara	<i>Novo syllabario ou arte de aprender a ler em pouco tempo para uso dos aprendizes artífices do arsenal de guerra da corte</i>	1879
João Maria Duarte	<i>Syllabario</i> <sup>13</sup>	1895
Joaquim Maria de Lacerda	<i>Novo syllabario portuguez ou methodo facil para aprender a ler o portuguez, composto para uso das escolas brasileiras</i>	1879

**Sources:** Prepared by the author based on a search in the *Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira da Biblioteca Nacional*

Initially, when organizing the table, the third column was titled “Year of the 1st edition” of each of the syllabaries, taking as reference the volumes of Blake’s *Diccionario Bibliographico Brasileiro* (1883, 1893, 1895, 1898, 1899, 1900, 1902). However, when comparing the dates mentioned by the author with some examples that we found and with some theoretical references, it was possible to verify inconsistencies. Therefore, we chose to include,

<sup>9</sup> Through the Report of the General Inspectorate of Primary and Secondary Education of the Municipality of Corte, we obtained information that Eduardo de Sá Pereira de Castro produced a syllabary, since in 1858 this body explained that the board of directors had approved the admission, in schools, of the “lithographed or stamped tables of the syllabary composed” by Castro (Relatorio da Inspectoria Geral..., 1858, p. 7). In Blake’s work (1893) it is stated that, among the works written by Castro, is the one entitled *Systema de leitura*, published in 1861, officially adopted by public education in the Province of Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>10</sup> We have only identified one mention of this syllabary published by Estevão dos Santos Fasciotti. Without specifying the full title, the newspaper note explains that the book is divided into 16 lessons (Jornal do Commercio, February 26, 1887, p. 2)..

<sup>11</sup> In Blake’s work (1895), we identified the author’s surname spelled as “Koeffer”. Tambara (2003) includes two entries for the author in his inventory, the first with the surname “Hoeffer” and the second as “Koeffer”, but they are the same person. Based on the survey carried out in the *Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira da Biblioteca Nacional*, we observed that in the Rio de Janeiro press the book was advertised as being written by “Carlos Hoefer”.

<sup>12</sup> In the report presented to the General Legislative Assembly by the Minister and Secretary of State for Imperial Affairs, Carlos Leôncio de Carvalho, the section that listed public teachers who had written didactic works specified the name of João da Matta Araújo with a published syllabary (Carvalho, 1878, p. 35).

<sup>13</sup> We have not yet been able to identify the exact title of this syllabary written by private teacher João Maria Duarte in Santa Catarina. In the newspaper *Republica*, from Florianópolis, on June 26, 1895, there is a note from the Secretariat of Public Instruction approving Duarte’s syllabary for schools and authorizing the purchase of 2,500 copies (Republica, 1895, p. 1).



in this third column, the earliest date of mention of the books in the sources inventoried in the *Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira da Biblioteca Nacional*, which does not necessarily correspond to the year of the 1st edition or of subsequent editions. We did not include in this survey the bilingual syllabaries produced for immigrant schools in Brazil, printed materials that were generally published in Portuguese and a second language.

With regard to the table, some issues draw attention. Only three printed materials were mentioned up to 1850; the others are from 1857 onwards, with a greater concentration in the 1970s, which is also in line with the context of the history of Brazilian educational editions, in which there was an exponential increase in national production from the 1860s and 1870s (Mortatti, 2000; Vojniak, 2014). There were, indeed, the presence of Portuguese syllabaries that circulated throughout the country, but those written by Brazilian authors or naturalized Brazilians are in greater quantity. Another point concerns the massive presence of male writers. There are 37 authors, of which three women stand out: Delphina Rosa da Silva Vasconcellos, Emilia Augusta de Azevedo Braga and Thomazia de Siqueira Queiroz Vasconcellos, with the caveat that the work attributed to the first female writer was attributed to her without there being any document to confirm it.

Regarding the presence of women as authors of school publications in the 19th century, Valdez, Panizzolo, Dias and Rocha (2025) point out that this presence was timid, but it existed, which does not detract from the work of those who stood out as pioneers (or not) in this field. The authors warn that, “although education, especially primary education, which at the time was responsible for teaching reading and writing, was carried out by female teachers, that is, by women, those who produced, in the majority, the teaching materials were men” (Valdez; Panizzolo; Dias; Rocha, 2025, p. 17). Regarding the stories of these women and others who worked in scenarios where the presence of women was uncommon, there is still much to be said and researched, despite there being a growing movement in an attempt to write biographies of them. Far from reproducing hegemonic views that seek patterns of exceptionality in these women, producing a history that brings reductionism and stereotypes (Vergara, 1999; Louro, 2015), our defense is that names like Delphina, Emilia and Thomazia come to light, inciting a plural and intersectional history, because, after all, “we need writing that reveals different women, whether black, white, *quilombola*, indigenous and others, poor or elite, Brazilian and foreign, outside of heteronormative standards, of public and private spaces, etc.” (Dias; Rocha, 2024, 16-17).

Another relevant aspect in table 1 concerns the names attributed to the syllabaries, in which there is resonance of some elements that catch our eye. The adjective “new” is present in the titles, in an attempt to convey a sense of authenticity and novelty in these publications, which sought to establish themselves as syllabaries aligned with methods considered to be the most modern. References to the local area are also present, with terms such as “national”, “Brazilian”, “Portuguese” and “*Fluminense*”, denoting the nationalist and regionalist spirit that was projected, typical of the historical period. Three of the inventoried syllabaries have the authors’ surnames in their titles: *Syllabario Azamor*, *Syllabario Vasconcellino* and *Syllabario Mascarenhas* or *Jogo das Syllabas*. From proper names to the status of adjectives, the surnames of their authors in titles were also not uncommon at that time, not only to demarcate the recognition of the author's achievement, but, above all, to specify the authorship, legitimizing their own method with originality and distancing themselves from the controversies that arose around the issues of plagiarism of books for teaching reading and writing, frequent in nineteenth-century Portugal and Brazil (Maciel; Rocha, 2022).

The reference to the syllabary as a “first reading book” is something to emphasize, since this expression was present in the titles of four works, three of them from the 1870s and one from 1882. Maciel and Frade (2004, p. 49) explain that the designations of books for introductory reading “vary according to the pedagogy, the country and the time period, with the term *Primeiro Livro de Leitura* being common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries”.

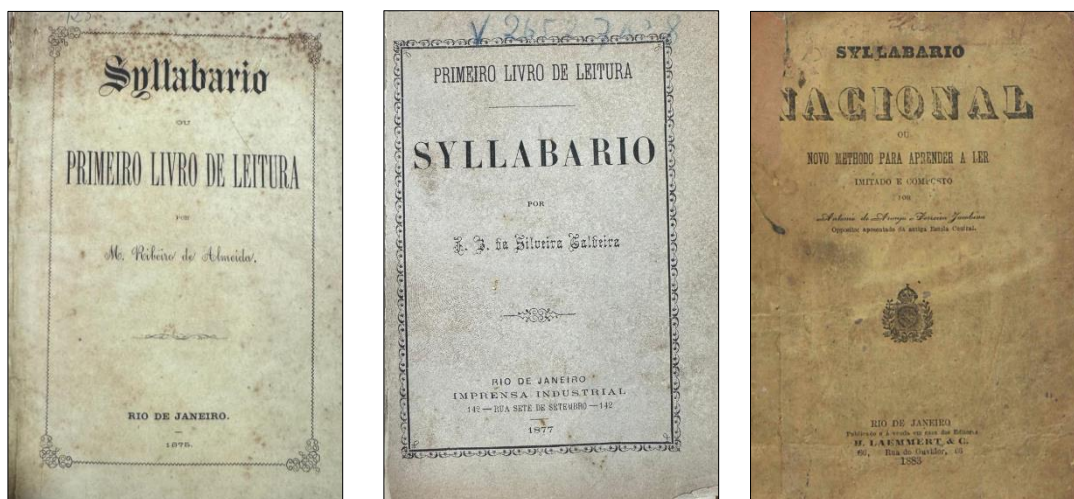
Everything leads us to believe, based on the studies carried out, that the term “*primeiro livro de leitura*”, although already in circulation in the first half of the 19th century, became popular in Brazil with the implementation of graduated teaching and graduated reading series, generally composed of three to five reading books. In some series there was a primer and a first reading book; in others, the first reading book was the one intended for teaching the first letters. We cannot rule out the possibility that the expression “*primeiro livro de leitura*” also named a section within the works intended for this teaching. A notable example is the printed *Novo expositor portuguez ou methodo facil para aprender a ler o portuguez tanto a letra estampada e a manuscripta compost para uso das escolas brasileiras*, by the nineteenth-century writer Joaquim Maria de Lacerda, which was subdivided into three parts: syllabary, first reading book and short treatises (Rocha; Dias, 2023).

Returning to the elements in chart 1, as a final consideration, it is noted that the titles of the books also promoted the promises of teaching reading to “learn easily”, “quickly”, “in a short time”, with “little time to use” the syllabary, containing an “easy method to learn to read”. These concepts, widely disseminated in the nineteenth century, marked the three syllabaries identified up to that point, which will be analyzed in the next topic.

### Three syllabaries and their authors in interface with the history of reading instruction in Brazil

Among the syllabaries inventoried, it was possible to have full access to three, which we will discuss below: the *Syllabario ou primeiro livro de leitura*, by Manuel Ribeiro de Almeida (1875), the *Primeiro livro de leitura: Syllabario*, by João Braz da Silveira Caldeira (1877) and the *Syllabario nacional ou novo método para aprender a ler*, by Antonio de Araujo Ferreira Jacobina (1883).

**Figure 1.** Covers of the syllabaries by Manuel Ribeiro de Almeida (1875), João Braz da Silveira Caldeira (1877) and Antonio de Araujo Ferreira Jacobina (1883), respectively.



**Source:** Biblioteca Nacional (Silabários de Almeida e de Caldeira) and Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa/ Serviço de Biblioteca (Silabário de Jacobina).

The covers of the books, like others that circulated during the period, follow a graphic layout pattern typical of nineteenth-century printed material: at the top is the title of the work, then, centered, the name of the author, and just below a line or coat of arms dividing the previous information from that at the bottom of the page, showing the place and year of printing. This

information reveals that the three books were printed in Rio de Janeiro in different printing houses, although with many editorial similarities.

In the *Syllabario ou primeiro livro de leitura* and in the *Primeiro livro de leitura: Syllabario*, the word in evidence is “syllabário”, while in the *Syllabario nacional ou novo method para aprender a ler*, it is the word “nacional” that is highlighted in hollow letters. In the case of Jacobina's syllabary, the emphasis on the term “national” may make explicit the idea of nationalization in the didactic production that circulated at that time, making it clear that the writers brought to their works a pride in their homeland in search of the identity of the Brazilian being, modernization and civility. However, it should be noted that this nationalization of production and the search for a national identity did not manifest itself in a work that was entirely original and eminently Brazilian, since many nineteenth-century authors, including Jacobina himself, based themselves on foreign books (Rocha; Maciel, 2022). Furthermore, many works, although original in content, were printed abroad, approaching the graphic and typographic resources of production in transnational contexts (Frade, 2010b).

Taking as a reference research on the biographies of the authors of these syllabaries (Monarcha, 2023; Oliveira, Valdemarin, 2023; Rocha, Maciel, 2022; Rocha, Miyoshi, 2023), we know that they were men from wealthy families and were educated in Brazil and abroad. They worked as teachers and in other professions in various sectors, including the public sphere itself. They aimed to publish a work with the intention of spreading a method of teaching reading capable of overcoming the educational problems of the period. In addition, they wrote books in other areas of knowledge, opened schools or courses aimed at spreading their methods, and gave conferences to disseminate them. Jacobina is from Pernambuco, Caldeira is from São Paulo, and Almeida is from Rio de Janeiro; all three had public and professional lives in the Provinces of São Paulo and/or Rio de Janeiro. Although they lived at the same time, we have not been able to identify any aspects that show they had close relations. However, it is possible to conjecture that they circulated in some similar spaces and had “social networks” (Sirinelli, 2003) in common, since they frequented the Court. Caldeira and Almeida were decorated at the *Exposição Pedagógica do Rio de Janeiro* in 1883, the year in which Jacobina published his syllabary. Jacobina, in turn, received several honors throughout his life, managing to move, without polarization, between the Empire and the Republic.

Their lives are unique, but they also demonstrate one of the sides of the history of educational productions in Brazil: the printed works that came to light in the nineteenth century context, many of them were written by public agents who frequented environments of the Brazilian elite and maintained personal and political relationships that projected them and made it possible to publish works with the government's seal, intended for teaching, which made their circulation in schools possible.

Delving into the content of the syllabaries, we can see that they all have a first part with a preface written by the authors, whose pages are numbered in Roman numerals. Immediately after, comes the method itself, with pages numbered in cardinal numbers. In the case of the syllabaries of Almeida (1875) and Caldeira (1877), the page numbers between these parts are

not continuous, while in the work of Jacobina (1883) the numbering is already continuous, as shown in Chart 2:

**Chart 2.** Internal organization of the syllabaries of Almeida (1875), Caldeira (1877) and Jacobina (1883)

Syllabary	Total number of pages	Internal organization of the work
<i>Syllabario ou primeiro livro de leitura</i> (Almeida, 1875)	64 pages	p. III-XII: “Introduction” (Explanation of the method). p. 1-42: Lessons and exercises. p. 43-52: “Observations about the value of vowels and some consonants”.
<i>Primeiro livro de leitura: Syllabario</i> (Caldeira, 1877)	58 pages	pp. V-XXI: “Introduction” (Explanation of the method). p. 1-37: “Alphabet”
<i>Syllabario nacional ou novo methodo para aprender a ler</i> (Jacobina, 1883)	80 pages	p. V: Letter from Jacobina to Ruy Barbosa. p. VII-VIII: Reply letter from Ruy Barbosa to Jacobina. p. IX-X: “To the reader” (Presentation of the book addressed to readers). p. XI-XII: “Explanation” (Brief explanations on how to apply the method). p. 13-57: Syllabary divided into parts. p. 58-80: “Current reading” (Narrative and informative texts).

**Source:** Prepared by the author.

The way in which the pagination of the syllabaries was organized, with Roman and cardinal numerals, did not follow a trend of the period, nor of the type of printing. When analyzing other Brazilian books from the 19th century, which are kept in the *Biblioteca Nacional* in Rio de Janeiro, we believe that this issue was much more a result of the decisions of the typographers than of an organization intended to be applied in school works. However, we cannot deny that this pagination pattern was common in 19th century textbooks.

In all printed materials, introductory notes were included that explained the principles of the method developed by their authors, indicating that the books called “syllabaries” also contained, in addition to the sequence of lessons, a methodological principle. Just like ABC cards and alphabets, it was common for syllabaries to be characterized, historically, as stapled booklets, which included only tables or syllable cards. The books by Almeida (1875), Caldeira (1877) and Jacobina (1883) are in codex and contain didactic guidelines for teachers to use.

In the terms discussed in the previous section, it is understood that syllabaries were synonymous with archaic and traditional books, being associated with the spelling method. However, it is precisely this view that the writers of the three books analyzed here oppose.

Almeida (1875) presented a critique of the syllabaries that circulated in schools, since they taught all the letters together, in sequence the various syllables in series, creating difficulties for students. He added that “all this, coming together like this, without a plan, without method, is chaos” (Almeida, 1875, p. V). He claimed that, out of respect for the child’s intelligence, he proposed a methodology that worked with the letters in a rational, graduated and methodical order. In each lesson, a small set of letters and syllables was learned, always going back to the previous ones. In his words,

The first lesson covers only three vowels and one consonant. The boy's attention is focused on learning a few letters and immediately combining them to form syllables and words, so that he immediately understands the usefulness of the lesson, knows how to read, and this result encourages him to continue studying. Two new letters and the repetition of those already known are the subject of the second lesson, and so on. Little by little, new letters and new syllables arouse his curiosity, and he applies them through exercises in which he always has before his eyes the same elements, placed in different positions and differently combined, so that he gets used to knowing them at first sight without confusing them (Almeida, 1875, p. VI).

He initially explained vowels and then moved on to teaching consonants in pairs, according to their sound similarities: p/b, t/d, f/v, m/n, etc. Each lesson included words and phrases from the children's vocabulary, with the aim of awakening the child's curiosity and interest in reading. Regarding the method, he criticized the “old spelling” and the “new spelling”, defending a proposal that would move “from the knowledge of letters to the knowledge of syllables without spelling, limiting itself using the syllables” (Almeida, 1875, p. IX), although he explained that, if the teacher wanted, he could apply the spelling process with his book.

Caldeira (1877), in the introduction to his book, reiterated his criticism of the reading methods widespread in schools. He explained the history of the alphabet to mention that there was no rationality or science in the alphabetical order, proposing that it must be rethought so that the student could achieve better advantages in their learning. Unlike Almeida (1875), he brought vowels and consonants mixed together, so that the order followed principles arising from the functioning of the language itself, without prioritizing that two letters with similar sounds were taught in sequence. In a more detailed manner, Caldeira (1877) says that the student will learn the sound of a letter and the teacher will demonstrate, in the word, the representations of this sound. He adds that

Of course, one should first show words in which there is a single sound of a, for example: *dá, pá, má, fã, cá* etc. Then he asks the student to name words in which this sound is found. Finally, the student will have to copy on the stone the different characters that represent the *a* (Caldeira, 1877, p. XVII).

Caldeira's syllabary (1877), therefore, did not completely break with the spelling method, but incorporated some new features into it, especially in the association of writing with learning to read. The author also warned of the need to break down letters and demonstrate their strokes, which, for him, already constituted aspects of the calligraphy class. In addition, he cited the method of the Portuguese António Feliciano de Castilho, without incorporating it completely, since, in this proposal, he “combines, analyzes and dissects sounds of the spoken word, breaking it down into its phonic elements and recomposing it in its entirety of meaning” (Boto, 2012, p. 56).

Caldeira (1877) refers to Castilho in at least two passages: first, when citing the practice of “aural reading” and, later, when highlighting the short stories that the writer used in teaching each letter, with the aim of helping the learner to memorize both the sound and its graphic representation (Caldeira, 1877, p. XVI-XVII). The “aural reading” was a proposal in which, as Castilho (1853) explained, the teacher presented the isolated sounds of a word and the students, by listening to them, discovered which word had been dictated by the teacher. Then, the process was repeated, but in reverse, as in the example:

MASTER = *Q, á; z, u?*  
 DISCIPPLE = *Cá; zu: Caso.*  
 THE SAME DISCIPLES = *Q, á; z, u?*  
 MASTER = *Cá; zu: Caso* (Castilho, 1853, p. 25).

Following this practice, Castilho (1853) introduced “eye reading”, carried out by decoding written records. In Caldeira’s work (1877), it is called “visual reading”, making the following recommendation: “The teacher should increase and vary the exercises, always taking care not to limit the student to visual reading; it is absolutely necessary to force him to read by ear [...]” (Caldeira, 1877, p. XVI).

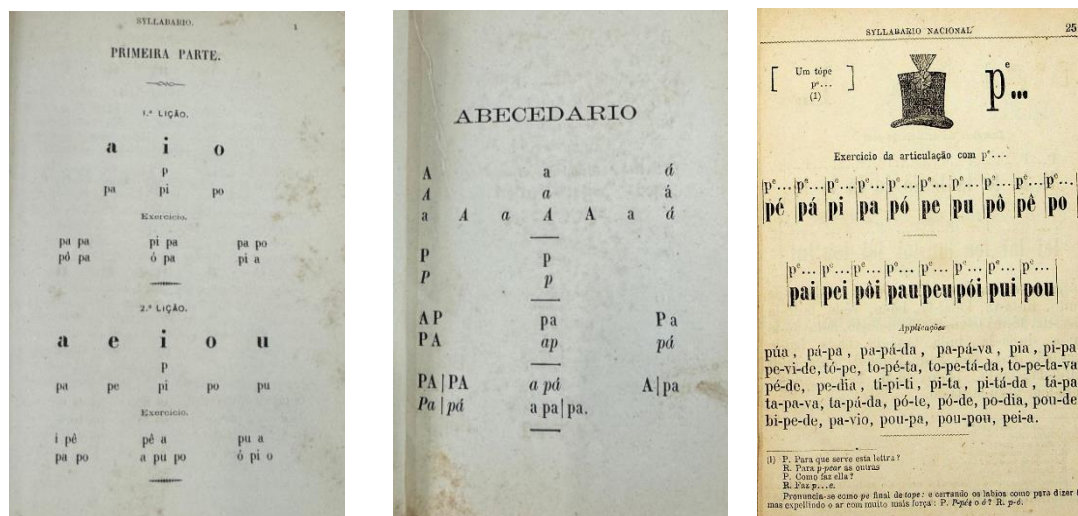
In Jacobina’s syllabary (1883), in the initial part, there was a criticism of the inefficiency of the teaching methods that were in primary education classes and, furthermore, he introduced intuitive teaching as an element that made up the principles of the modern school, since, by developing the student’s intelligence through observation and thinking, the teacher’s work would be made easier.

Regarding how to apply the method, the author gives a very concise explanation, but throughout the pages of the book, Jacobina (1883) uses footnotes with recommendations for teachers. Basically, the proposal corresponds to a sequence of questions that the teacher asks, leading the “student to understand the action of the consonant on the vowels, which is the greatest difficulty in reading” (Jacobina, 1883, p. XI). The student gradually learns to “voice” the letters, a practice that, today, resembles the vocalization of isolated phonemes, which Jacobina (1883) called “articulation exercises”. Next, the author recommends practicing “applications”, consisting of reading words, initially in a syllabic manner (a slower reading, marking each syllable) and, later, a faster reading. Regarding the organization of the work,

The *Syllabario Nacional*, unlike other national and international productions for teaching reading, was not organized into lessons, but it is possible to identify them, since the procedures used by the author to introduce each letter are the same. Regarding the introduction of the letters, it is important to highlight that Jacobina instructs the teacher to be careful not to say the name of the letter, for example, *t = tê; f = éfe*. He suggests that, when presenting/voicing/speaking the letters, the teacher and the student should suppress the support of the vowels when pronouncing them orally. Throughout the work, the teacher is instructed to follow the same ritual: he/she starts with an illustration according to the chosen letter, then asks the questions and answers, differing only in the letters that are introduced, as well as the recommendations on how to pronounce them, the position of the teeth, lips and breathing to emit the appropriate sounds (Rocha; Maciel, 2022, p. 12).

An interesting aspect is that, unlike other syllabaries, Jacobina (1883) uses images to present a new letter. As for the graphic layout of the pages and the font of the letters used, the books by Almeida (1875) and Caldeira (1877) are similar, while Jacobina’s (1883) follows other formats.

**Figure 2.** Pages of the syllabaries, respectively, by Manuel Ribeiro de Almeida (1875), João Braz da Silveira Caldeira (1877) and Antonio de Araujo Ferreira Jacobina (1883).



**Source:** Biblioteca Nacional (Almeida's and Caldeira's Syllables) and Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa/Library Service (Jacobina's Syllables).

From the pages illustrated above, it is possible to distinguish the syllabic division strategies in the proposed exercises. In the *Syllabario ou primeiro livro de leitura* (1st image), the division of syllables is marked only by a space, while in *the Primeiro livro de leitura: Syllabario* (2nd image) it is done with a slash, and in the *Syllabario Nacional ou novo methodo para aprender a ler* (3rd image), with a hyphen<sup>14</sup>. As the reading exercises progress in the three books, this division is eliminated. Generally, on each page of the syllabaries, we find more than one exercise with the letters taught, and they are separated by the same graphic strategy: a dash or line, which indicates the beginning and end of each proposal.

The syllabaries highlighted the role of the teacher in applying the reading method, emphasizing the didactic care that he or she must take to achieve good results, which depend on a methodologically guided process based on the practice of repetition and memorization, without losing sight of play and fun. The promise of learning to read in less time is also present in the three printed materials analyzed in this section, which claim to be capable of solving the problems of primary education, in addition to making this process of teaching reading less boring.

By presenting these perspectives, they adopted a recurring discourse at that time of disputes within a publishing market focused on the production of school books that was consolidating. The syllabaries and their authors wanted to break with practices considered “traditional” for teaching reading, but, according to the analysis carried out so far, it can be seen that they maintained many methodological aspects that were common in the works of the time. Regarding these tensions between the modern and the traditional in the history of literacy, Mortatti (2019) asserts: “however, a certain continuity of meanings is preserved: modern is

<sup>14</sup> According to the study by Rocha and Maciel (2022), due to the graphic layout of the pages and the organization of the methodological approach of the activities, Jacobina's work (1883) contains “possible approximations with the productions of the French Pierre Régimbeau and the Portuguese João de Deus, and, [...] we also highlight the influence of the English Norman Allison Calkins, possibly introduced to Jacobina by Rui Barbosa” (Maciel; Rocha, 2022, p. 14).



equivalent to new (recent), better and revolutionary, but it is inevitably defined based on tradition, considered old, ancient, undesirable and traditional” (Mortatti, 2019, p. 25).

As for the teaching of writing, the works of Almeida (1875) and Jacobina (1883) do not mention it at any time, focusing on the teaching of reading. In contrast, Caldeira's syllabary (1877) establishes that the teacher could use some practices to teach reading and writing:

I explain and make the student repeat the different sounds of *a*, then I show him words in which these sounds are present. Of course, we must first show words that only have a single sound for *a*, for example: *dá, pá, má, fã, cá*, etc. Then, we ask the student to name words that contain this sound. Finally, the student will have to copy on the stone<sup>15</sup> the different characters that represent the *a* (Caldeira, 1877, p. XVII).

In the nineteenth century, writing was generally taught after reading. In this regard, Frade (2010a) reports that the defense of simultaneous teaching of reading and writing “begins to appear as pedagogical discourse and in manuals and books produced at the end of the nineteenth century” (Frade, 2010a, p. 271). The author highlights the works of Felisberto de Carvalho within this innovative approach, and we could add other better-known works, such as those of Hilário Ribeiro, João Köpke, Octaviano Hudson and, no less important, the *Primeiro livro de leitura: Syllabario*, by João Braz da Silveira Caldeira.

Another unique aspect in the syllabaries of Almeida (1875) and Caldeira (1877) is the indication that the proposals contained in their works need to be enriched by the teachers. Almeida (1875) recommends that the teacher write other words on the stone, in addition to those in the syllabary, or write them in advance on paper or even compose them, apparently with movable letters of the alphabet (on cards). These letters could be used by the student to practice writing syllables and words (Almeida, 1875, p. VIII). In the syllabary of Caldeira (1877), the warning provides fewer details, specifying only that the teacher should add and vary the exercises. This ideology is in line with the widely-held view that the teacher was solely responsible for teaching reading, disregarding the social and material conditions of schools. There were widespread statements by provincial presidents and other authorities that teacher training courses and professionalization, combined with the adoption of government-approved textbooks, would be capable of solving the existing and persistent problems in Brazilian education.

Finally, the syllabaries analyzed here also contemplate the practice of regular reading with short texts for students to practice at the end of each letter or syllable taught or at the end of the book. These productions essentially have a moralizing, religious, patriotic nature, informative, molding the child to kindness, obedience to God, the Church, parents and the State, dialoguing with the national educational production that was increasing at that time.

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<sup>15</sup> At another point, Caldeira (1877) also says that the student can make a copy on slate or stone, imitating “each of the characters that appear in the lesson” (Caldeira, 1877, p. XVI).



## Final considerations about syllabaries and new paths...

The syllabaries inventoried in this work were identified through a survey of periodical press notes available in the collection of the *Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira da Biblioteca Nacional*. These books were mentioned in bookstore advertisements, newspapers thanking the authors for sending a copy of their syllabaries, press and authority opinions attesting to their effectiveness in teaching reading, publications made by the authors themselves, reports from provincial governments citing books requested or sent to schools, publications of correspondence and reports from teachers about their use, and thanks from some provinces to the authors for receiving donations of syllabaries as a commercial marketing strategy. All references provided elements not only to list the titles and their authors, but also to understand that the term “syllabary” became popular as a reference not only to pamphlets but also to books for teaching initial reading and their methods in the 19th century.

In addition to the 34 syllabaries identified in a very generic way, some allusions to others were found that open space for new research on the typology of this printed material.

For example, in 1850, at the School of the Director and Professor Theodolindo Cesar Castello Branco, in the Province of Rio de Janeiro, letters of the alphabet and syllabaries written by the aforementioned teacher were used (*Jornal do Commercio*, 1850). References to this situation also occurred in other sources, so that several schools adopted syllabaries written by the directors, but it was not possible to investigate whether they were printed or handwritten works to meet a local context, requiring more in-depth research. In another school in the same Province, in 1858, there is news that among the compendiums used were: “*Syllabario, Doutrina Christãa*, by Pimentel” (Tolentino, 1858, p. 1). The mention of only the authors’ surnames and the lack of details made it impossible to include some syllabary titles in the inventory, as there was no way to identify their authorship with precision. Another case is the announcement of the publication of a syllabary extracted from *Methodo facillimo para aprender a ler tanto a letra redonda e a manuscripta em mais breve de tempo*, written by the Portuguese writer, Emilio Achilles Monteverde, sold separately (*Jornal da Victoria*, 1867, p. 4). There is also the invention of Joaquim José Menezes Vieira, in 1881, the “*Grophoscopia*”, which consisted of a wooden object that contained cylinders that unrolled paper strips with “a syllabary or a large number of syllabic combinations in printed and manuscript characters, drawings, figures, common pictures of life for the lessons of things” (*Revista Brasileira*, 1881, p. 343). All these issues demonstrate that the repertoire of syllabaries published or that circulated in the nineteenth-century Brazilian context is much broader than that presented here, inciting different investigations, of a regional nature, in the archives spread throughout the country.

The three syllabaries analyzed in this work – *Syllabario ou primeiro livro de leitura*, by Almeida (1875), *Primeiro livro de leitura: Syllabario*, by Caldeira (1877), and *Syllabario nacional ou novo method para aprender a ler*, by Jacobina (1883) – go against the prevailing view in historical studies, which often claim that syllabaries did not have a methodological approach. As works aimed at enabling teachers to apply the method, they represent principles

of the schooling of reading in the 19th century, aligning themselves with the perspectives of fast, efficient and enjoyable teaching, widely disseminated during the Empire.

The syllabaries, however, were missing from the tables of many boys and girls scattered throughout Brazilian homes in the nineteenth century, since school was for the few and teaching materials did not reach the majority either. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the reach and circulation of this printed material called syllabary. But that is another story, “here is what we consider sufficient to say in relation to the little book that we are now researching” (Caldeira, 1877, p. XXI).

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