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PAPERS

"*Here in the Leprosarium we had a profession*": narratives that intertwine education, civilization, and experiences with disease[1]

"*Aqui no Leprosário tivemos uma profissão*": narrativas que entrelaçam educação, civilização e as experiências com a doença

"Aquí en el Leprosería tuvimos una profesión": narrativas que entrelazan educación, civilización y las experiencias con la enfermedad

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Abstract

This article analyzes the narratives of individuals who experienced compulsory isolation at the Antônio Aleixo leprosarium in Manaus/AM between 1942 and 1978, focusing on their experiences of basic schooling and vocational education in this context. It begins from the historical problem of stigmatization associated with Hansen's disease and its effects on the social organization of the Colony, understood as a social figuration marked by relations of interdependence, control, and adaptation, in light of Norbert Elias (1990; 1994). Methodologically, the study is based on narrative interviews conducted with 24 former inmates, selected through community nomination, whose accounts were analyzed using thematic analysis procedures. The results indicate that schooling simultaneously served the functions of sociability, discipline, and preparation for work, revealing relational dimensions between educational inclusion and institutional mechanisms that regulate conduct. Vocational education, predominantly organized through short-term, non-structured qualification courses, functioned both as a possibility for social insertion and as a strategy for the productive and moral organization of the inmates. The study contributes to the social history of vocational education by demonstrating how educational practices in contexts of isolation produced specific forms of subjectivation, work, and social belonging.

Keywords: Civilization; Education; Leprosy.

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Resumo

Este artigo analisa as narrativas de pessoas que vivenciaram o isolamento compulsório no leprosário Antônio Aleixo, em Manaus/AM, entre 1942 e 1978, com foco nas experiências de escolarização básica e de educação profissional nesse contexto. Parte-se do problema histórico da estigmatização associada à hanseníase e de seus efeitos na organização social da Colônia, compreendida como uma figuração social marcada por relações de interdependência, controle e adaptação, à luz de Norbert Elias (1990; 1994). Metodologicamente, a pesquisa fundamenta-se em entrevistas narrativas realizadas com 24 ex-internos, selecionados por indicação comunitária, cujos relatos foram analisados por meio de procedimentos de análise temática. Os resultados indicam que a escolarização desempenhou simultaneamente funções de sociabilidade, disciplinamento e formação para o trabalho, revelando aspectos relacionais entre a inclusão educativa e os mecanismos institucionais de regulação das condutas. A educação profissional, majoritariamente organizada em cursos de qualificação de curta duração não estruturantes, configurou-se tanto como possibilidade de inserção social quanto como estratégia de organização produtiva e moral dos internos. O estudo contribui para a história social da Educação Profissional ao evidenciar como práticas educativas em contextos de isolamento produziram formas específicas de subjetivação, de trabalho e de pertencimento social.

Palavras-chave: Civilização; Educação; Hanseníase.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza las narrativas de personas que vivieron el aislamiento compulsorio en el leprosario Antônio Aleixo, en Manaus/AM, entre 1942 y 1978, centrándose en las experiencias de escolarización básica y de educación profesional en ese contexto. Se parte del problema histórico de la estigmatización asociada a la hanseniasis y de sus efectos en la organización social de la Colonia, entendida como una figuración social marcada por relaciones de interdependencia, control y adaptación, a la luz de Norbert Elias (1990; 1994). Metodológicamente, la investigación se fundamenta en entrevistas narrativas realizadas a 24 exinternos, seleccionados por indicación comunitaria, cuyos relatos fueron analizados mediante procedimientos de análisis temático. Los resultados indican que la escolarización desempeñó simultáneamente funciones de sociabilidad, disciplinamiento y formación para el trabajo, lo que revela aspectos relacionales entre la inclusión educativa y los mecanismos institucionales de regulación de la conducta. La educación profesional, organizada mayoritariamente en cursos de cualificación de corta duración no estructurantes, se configuró tanto como una posibilidad de inserción social como una estrategia de organización productiva y moral de los internos. El estudio contribuye a la historia social de la educación profesional al evidenciar cómo las prácticas educativas en contextos de aislamiento produjeron formas específicas de subjetivación, trabajo y pertenencia social.

Palabras clave: civilización; Educación; Hanseniasis.

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Introduction

The social history of leprosy is rooted in processes of stigmatization linked to historical forms of social classification. In this context, people affected by the disease were given labels such as "cursed," "wretched," "leper," "Hansen's patient," "unclean," and "disfigured." These terms not only described the clinical condition, but also produced social identities associated with inferiority, exclusion, and indelible marks of the "sick." These designations reveal the symbolic mechanisms of social hierarchy that bring the experience of leprosy closer to what Elias and Scotson (2000) describe as the relationship between the dominant group and outsiders. When a dominant group seeks to preserve its superior position, it stigmatizes those deemed deviant or threatening to the social order. Historically, widespread representations of leprosy produced suffering that went beyond physical illness. For this reason, social stigma was as striking as the experience of the disease itself (Maciel, 2007; Gomes, 2020; Curi, 2012).

Within this context, Brazilian leprosaria emerged as a total institution (Goffman, 2000). These institutions were designed to isolate and manage the lives of individuals affected by leprosy. The Antônio Aleixo Colony in Manaus is one such institution. Its history allows us to understand how such social processes materialize in everyday experiences of schooling and vocational training through a micro-analysis.

The Antonio Aleixo leprosarium in Manaus, Amazonas, was a place where people affected by leprosy were isolated during a time when stigma and marginalization were at their worst. The narratives of those who lived in this environment reveal the difficulties they faced, as well as their resistance and resilience. Though limited, schooling played a crucial role in their lives by offering opportunities for learning and socialization and by challenging the view of the disease as an irrevocable fate. Thus, educational experiences within the leprosarium are intertwined with identity formation, allowing for deeper reflection on education's impact in restrictive contexts. Simultaneously, these experiences enable us to comprehend the vocational education developed there as a historical phenomenon associated with an exclusionary societal project. This project is characterized by processes that discipline and control bodies, as well as prepare individuals for socially vulnerable forms of integration into the world of work.

Given this background, this article aims to investigate the experiences of people affected by leprosy at the leprosarium, highlighting their schooling experiences and how these experiences contributed to the construction of subjectivities amidst compulsory isolation within the context of the civilizing process (Elias, 1990).

The civilizing process is not a natural human trait, but rather the result of humanity's interaction with nature and culture throughout history. This interaction enables the formation of habitus, which Elias (1990) describes as a kind of second nature, an incorporation of collective knowledge. Through interaction across generations, an individual adapts to new patterns of behavior and psychological conduct. Thus, we believe that schooling has become a project of Western civilization, or a civilizing action.

It downplays national differences among peoples: it emphasizes what is common to all human beings—or, in the view of those who hold this belief, what ought to be common to all. It manifests the self-confidence of people whose national borders and national identity have been so fully established for centuries that they are no longer a subject of debate—people who long ago expanded beyond their borders and colonized lands far beyond them (Elias, 1994, p. 25).

Adopting Elias's approach, we present the school in all its diversity as a meaningful environment. We acknowledge that the school is not merely a space of reproduction or an ideological apparatus of the state; rather, it is a place of experience, including that of people affected by leprosy during the period of isolation.

In his work Ethos and Figurations in the Amazonian Hinterland, Matos (2015, p. 40) draws on Elias's theory to highlight that the school advances the process of Western civilization, whether in urban or rural areas. The guiding principles of a good education—whether for whites, blacks, mulattos, Asians, mixed-race individuals, riverine communities, or indigenous and non-indigenous people of diverse ethnicities—are civilizing.

In light of these assumptions, the school is recognized as an institution that promotes changes in sociability and offers systematized, organized knowledge. Thus, it becomes an essential instrument of the civilizing process. According to Veiga (2002), the spread of schooling is a fundamental social activity for promoting changes in the mechanisms of producing social distinctions.

We recognize the narratives of former boarding school students as the methodological bridge in this process because they provide access to the subjective and relational dimensions of schooling, specifically how individuals interpret, reframe, and incorporate educational experiences into their life trajectories. Given that social formations are constituted by interdependencies among individuals and groups over time (Elias, 1990), we adopted a methodological approach that values narratives. Bosi (2003) conceptualizes these narratives as forms of social memory reconstruction and image memories. Within this framework, the methodological approach of this research is outlined.

Methodological Approaches to Research

To explore the experiences of individuals who lived at the Colônia Antônio Aleixo leprosarium in Manaus, Amazonas, we interviewed 24 participants, drawing on Elias's (1994) concept of the network of interdependence. This concept refers to the set of social relationships among individuals who share historical experiences, emotional bonds, and common life trajectories, wherein the actions of some are continuously connected to those of others. In this context, interviewees referred others based on relationships of trust, coexistence, and mutual recognition within the community. Thus, the referral process reflects the group's social configuration, marked by bonds of belonging and shared memory, more than it reflects an operational selection strategy. This highlights how local social networks function as mechanisms for circulating names, stories, and legitimacies.

We determined the final number of participants based on the criterion of theoretical saturation. We observed that the interviews presented recurring themes, experiences, everyday facts, and similar interpretations. This indicated that new narratives would not add substantively distinct elements to the analytical corpus.

The objective was to understand how education manifested itself in the lives of people with leprosy and what significance it held for them. To preserve their identities and ensure their privacy, all interviewees were identified by fictitious names.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: being lucid enough to describe events from the period of isolation to the present day, being recommended by neighborhood residents as a source of information for the study, signing the informed consent form authorizing the researcher to conduct the interview and disseminate the results, and having lived through the period of compulsory isolation (1942–1978). Exclusion criteria included disagreeing with or refusing to sign the informed consent form, requesting any financial benefit, or presenting any acute or chronic condition that limited the interviewee's ability to participate in the study.

We analyzed the interviews using thematic content analysis (Bardin, 1977) combined with an interpretive approach to the narratives. First, we conducted a preliminary reading of the corpus, then identified units of meaning present in the accounts.

Our understanding of the subject of study is based on the work of Ecléa Bosi (1994; 2003), who emphasizes memory's central role in constructing identity and forming personal narratives. Bosi argues that memories are not merely individual recollections, but also reflections on the collective. These reflections help reframe experiences of pain and marginalization. Adopting this approach allowed us to understand how the interviewees' memories of schooling and life in the leprosarium intertwine with their identities and how they confronted social stigma.

The research was approved by the ethics committee of the Federal University of Amazonas to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines.

Based on the ideas of Ecléa Bosi (1994; 2003), we understood the object of study as emphasizing the importance of memory in constructing identity and forming personal narratives. Bosi argues that memories are not merely individual recollections, but also reflections on the collective. These reflections help reframe experiences of pain and marginalization. Adopting this approach allowed us to understand how the interviewees' memories of schooling and life in the leprosarium intertwine with their identities and how they confronted social stigma.

The research was approved by the ethics committee of the Federal University of Amazonas to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines. The interviews were conducted openly and respectfully, allowing participants to share their experiences freely and providing a safe space to tell their stories. This qualitative approach allowed us to immerse ourselves in the individuals' experiences, highlighting the diversity of feelings and meanings attributed to schooling in such a challenging context.

Education and Civilization: An Eliasian Approach

In analyzing the relationship between schooling and civilization, Veiga (2009) and Honorato (2011) add that the institutionalization of schools would shape progress, the adoption of behavioral and conduct standards, and the transformation of the ordinary individual into a cultured, healthy, productive, and disciplined citizen. In other words, it would create a powerful modern state. In a historical analysis, this stage of the civilizing process supplants the increase in self-control over emotional behavior as a means of social control.

When speaking with former inmates, we learned that the schooling process had distinct phases: before, during, and after compulsory isolation. For most, educational experiences before the colony were scarce, as many came from rural areas in the state of Amazonas and did not always have access to them. Following the diagnosis of the illness, these moments, when they existed, were permeated by prejudice and alienation, as the following testimonies illustrate:

After arriving from the countryside and falling ill, I began studying at a school in the São Raimundo neighborhood. Jamili was the teacher, and Paty was the principal. One day, while I was studying, an inspector arrived. "Mr. Benedito, you can't study here." "What did I do?" "You can't study because you have leprosy." When the teacher saw how sad I was, she said she would bring me homework every day. "I'll bring it and take it back." I said, "No! Since the disease is so ugly, there's no need." I learned to read at the Colony with the authorities. It was here that I had access to an education because it was difficult back then (Mr. Benedito).

I really miss school, Ave Maria. Education is very precious. I think knowledgeable people are very admirable. We didn't have that opportunity. If we raised our hands, we were expelled. I've heard many people say, "I wish I were a leper so I could retire." I wanted to be healthy and earn my own money. I didn't want to be sick. I wished God had given me health (Mr. Luís).

In the colony, education can be divided into two periods: before and after the arrival of the Franciscan Sisters. Before their arrival, some schooling took place, but on a limited scale and without supervision. In other words, it was considered voluntary. Documentary records of schooling only begin in 1953, but Benedito recounts that there had always been a school. It was organized and funded by the leprosarium's administration through a charity fund, a collective financial fund established within leprosariums to provide material assistance to residents.

The fact that some of the teachers, such as Nestor Azevedo, Dona Rosa, Raimundo Quintino, and Orlando Brasil, were also residents, as mentioned in the above narratives, reveals a reconfiguration of interdependent relationships within the institution. This highlights the transitory and dynamic nature of figuration (Elias, 1994). By assuming the teaching role, these individuals transmitted knowledge and reconstructed social positions, power relations, and forms of collective recognition. Thus, schooling at the Colony can be understood as a dual process—a result of the limitations imposed by isolation and a strategy for the symbolic reconstruction of individuals facing social exclusion.

Despite the controversy surrounding the Franciscan Sisters of Mary's administration, mainly concerning strictness and discipline, the research participants agreed on one thing: the importance of education. According to them, all residents had to study, regardless of age. Since schooling was voluntary before the Franciscan Sisters arrived, many did not attend school or only went a few times. Dona Amora recalls that she did not study before the Franciscan Sisters arrived because her mother thought she might have a romantic relationship with the teacher. This caused her to stop studying.

Seu Marcelino points out that he always faced many difficulties, and that the few times he attended school were enough. He says that what he really liked was working because, back then, life was more difficult, and he needed an income to live better. The following narratives offer a glimpse into the historical context of the relationship between daily life and school.

As for the management of the colony, I can say that we became professionals during their tenure. That was one of the good things about the nuns. Father Mário was very concerned about our future. He had a vision for what lay ahead. He knew that one day the colony would become a community. The nuns were also very concerned. We had to learn something. For example, when I was 14, I was in the delivery room learning how to assist with childbirth. By the time I was 15, I was doing it on my own. Looking back, I'm grateful because when the Colony closed down, we had the opportunity to go out and earn a living (Dona Alzira).

Back in the sisters' day, everyone was required to study. Here, if you didn't go to school, you had to leave, whether you were an adult or a child. When the children arrived at ages 10 or 12, they already had families. The nuns would say, "You're going to be responsible for this child. You must take care of them, send them to school, and ensure they receive medical treatment" (Seu Benedito).

Dona Alzira and Seu Benedito's accounts reveal a significant aspect of the educational experience at the Antonio Aleixo Colony. They highlight professional training and development during the period of isolation, as well as the intertwining of work, social assistance, and social control within the context of compulsory isolation.

Dona Alzira emphasizes how the Colony's administration, influenced by the nuns and Father Mário, fostered an environment of learning and professionalization. This space was essentially practical and utilitarian, oriented toward learning the trades necessary to maintain the institution, which was linked to individual survival and to institutional demands. In light of the ideas of Frigotto (2010) and Ciavatta (2005), it is possible to understand that such vocational education experiences constitute historical expressions of

training linked to the social needs of labor reproduction. In this context, education assumes an adaptive function to institutional and productive demands rather than an emancipatory one.

Alzira's life story, in which she assisted with childbirth at age 15, illustrates the value placed on practical education and acquiring skills as fundamental to survival and autonomy in an exclusionary context. Recognizing the importance of this training for seeking job opportunities after the Colony's closure, Alzira's narrative illustrates how residents used practical knowledge to reconstruct their life trajectories.

On the other hand, Seu Benedito's narrative emphasizes the strictness of compulsory education, under which learning was a prerequisite for staying in the Colony. This requirement aimed to ensure schooling and foster a sense of collective responsibility, as older residents were responsible for caring for and educating children. This dynamic reinforces the idea that education served as a mechanism for social cohesion and resilience despite adverse conditions, contributing to the formation of a cohesive community. The narratives emphasize that schooling in the colony was not merely a matter of compliance but also helped construct identities and strengthen community bonds. It offered inmates the opportunity to redefine their lives amidst stigma and social exclusion. Thus, the school experience can be understood as both a mechanism for community integration and an institutional strategy for organizing social life in the colony. Next, we will discuss the two most common forms of education offered at the Colony: basic schooling and vocational education.

Flores da Colônia: Access to Basic Education[2]

According to Bosi (1994), there are old stories that everyone likes to retell because they have become familiar and serve as symbolic expressions. Reenacting these stories, which may involve clothing, customs, language, and emotions, conveys a collective memory of an event that left its mark on life in that place. At the Colony, one of the episodes that everyone recalled when we asked about schooling concerns was Teacher Orlando Brasil's cane.

It was a nearly two-meter-long stick that he would grab from the last student in the room and, if necessary, use to maintain order in the classroom, Mr. Marcelino recalls. They recount the punishments, the teacher's drawn-out, monotonous voice, and the many slaps to the hand received during math class. They laugh and criticize these memories, relating them to the current state of schools. Most believe that there is currently a lack of respect for teachers and commitment from students. The narratives reinforce the notion that disciplinary practices were legitimate components of the educational process.

Beyond individual memories, it is important to understand how this school experience was institutionalized and structured historically over time. In this sense, analyzing the first school in operation at the Antonio Aleixo Colony between 1942 and 1962 allows us to situate basic schooling within the context of health, welfare, and educational policies that solidified the leprosarium's institutional project.

The First School (1942–1962)

The first school established was referred to in official state documents as the "Escola Antônio Aleixo." However, according to one of the witnesses, Mr. Herculano, the school was

[2] The title of this section is inspired by the text *A Flor da Colônia*, written by Professor Davi Grijó, a teacher at the Violeta de Matos Areosa School, located in the Colônia Antônio Aleixo neighborhood, and composed in honor of the institution's 50th anniversary. The expression taps into a local collective memory, evoking the school as a symbol of belonging, education, and resilience within the Colônia neighborhood.

actually called "André Araújo." It was a simple, single-room schoolhouse located where the Sandra Braga building stands today. There was one multi-grade class per shift covering grades one through four, across all three shifts.

In terms of infrastructure, the school had traditional desks for two students each, a blackboard, chalk, and books. Although there were no uniforms, the witnesses said the school had a basic structure, with desks arranged in a single file. Regarding the organization of educational activities, the following accounts are available:

I repeated fifth grade three times because no one was allowed to drop out, but school only went up to fifth grade, so we had to repeat it even if we passed. I arrived when I was 10 and started school right away; by the time I got here, I was already in second grade, finished that here, and then repeated it.[3] I went to a school called André Araújo. I studied with Orlando Brasil (who taught in the morning and afternoon) and Raimundo Quintino (who taught at night). I studied in the morning, and I was the most mischievous student there. Orlando Brasil was kind of a tyrant. He wasn't very well-prepared. He was that old-school type. He had a stick that could reach the student in the back of the class. On Saturdays, there was a quiz, and whoever got it wrong got spanked. And he'd say: If you hit them gently, I'll be the one to hit them. I was good at math; today, when I look at this modern math, I don't really fit in (Mr. Herculano).

There was a school, and the teacher was from Hansen, in the Sandra Braga ward. I studied there. I always behaved myself and was always obedient. My teacher was Orlando Brasil. He had a huge stick that could reach the rebellious students, and he'd beat them with it. He was a good teacher, but he was just very cruel. But during the quiz, he'd go around the room and stand at the desk. Anyone who didn't know the answer was really in trouble (Dona Rosa).

We studied math, Portuguese, and social studies. Orlando Brasil was quite a tyrant; he used a cane, and with it, he'd reach all the way to the back of the room to hit whoever was causing trouble (Cleide).

I learned more from teacher Raimundo Quintino. He wasn't a tyrant, but Orlando Brasil and Azevedo were very mean. This Orlando Brasil had a long stick; he'd just stand there, watching. He'd hit you on the head and say, "Are you doing your work or talking?" Then, if you did something wrong, you'd have to kneel at the door, on top of the corn. That teacher was a mean one! (Mr. Marcelino).

The memory is so vivid that they reenact the gestures and speech, trying to bring that image to life. The famous cane used by Teacher Orlando Brasil left a lasting impression on the interviewees. It was the first thing they mentioned when asked about daily life at school. Teachers' attitudes reflect the civilizing process in education. In the traditional model, corporal punishments were common. Although we cannot expand on this topic here, it is worth noting that educational processes involving these practices followed a trend known as "traditional." Similarly, it is important to highlight the limitations and perspectives of this approach to viewing and conceiving the pedagogical process, as discussed in the texts of Nóvoa (2009) and Freire (2011). The interviewees highlighted the use of the palmatoria, which was a coercive measure aimed at disciplining through pain. According to Aragão and Freitas (2012, p. 26), "The palmatoria represented a symbol of power, hierarchy, generational differences, and a civilizing instrument."

While not our primary focus, it is important to note that such control practices frequently occurred within monitored spaces, such as classrooms, reinforcing the hierarchical structure

[3] When Herculano refers to the term "repeating" a grade, he is not talking about failing, but rather the lack of opportunities to move on. Since students were required to stay in school, many of them, upon completing the 4th grade—the final year of elementary school—had to "repeat" the grade, even though they had not failed.

and strict disciplinary control, whether by the teacher or the institution's senior administration. Attending school in spaces such as leprosariums was considered by residents a "privileged" yet controlled environment.

The Seduc/Am, the State Department of Education, provided the Antônio Aleixo School with incentives in the form of materials such as blackboards, chalk, and desks, as well as teacher salaries. The department periodically administered tests to assess students' learning levels. It is important to note that the rigidity of the classroom setup, the relationship between teachers and students, and the more authoritarian, teacher-centered approach to teaching and learning were all part of the pedagogical mindset of that context. This model's primary objective is to transmit knowledge without considering how students learn or whether they are learning—a characteristic of "Banking Education," as described by Freire (1999).

Nevertheless, most of the interviewees saw the school as a significant space with the potential to create opportunities. Many of them had no access to schooling outside the Colony. Thus, for most participants, schooling took place within the institution itself—a space that was simultaneously monitored and socially exclusionary.

The Second School (1963–1969)

Due to limited space at the Sandra Braga pavilion, the school relocated to the former leprosarium administration building from 1963 to 1969. Located near Colônia Square, this building housed the administration, the school, and a prison for patients who did not comply with the institution's rules.

According to the interviewees, the school had two classrooms, neither of which was in good condition. The two teaching spaces were divided by a curtain in a large hall. Due to physical limitations, the grades were grouped. The first classroom housed the first and second grades, and the second classroom served the third and fourth grades. In the evening, only one classroom remained in use for adult education. The following statements regarding school organization stand out:

The school averaged 60 students per session. There were fewer students in the evening because they were adults. There were textbooks, but no uniforms. Activities included dictation, copying, calligraphy, and math. One activity that stands out is the one on September 7. Sometimes, on Sundays, there were events at the churches. Back then, we sang the national anthem on Saturdays. We studied from Monday to Saturday (Mr. Herculano).

School was held at City Hall, which had a hall. The teacher was a tyrant. I was beaten once in my life at school by the teacher. I attended school up to fourth grade with three teachers. They changed every year. I learned so much during that time that I can handle anything today, especially after starting my own business. Before the colony, I didn't attend school. There, we only learned to read and count. I studied at night from 6:00 to 8:30 p.m. because the school's generator only provided electricity until 9:00 or 9:20 p.m. After that, we used oil lamps. When that time came, everyone had to be picked up. Many studied. Back then, it was the era of the quill pen. Two students shared each desk, which had a hole in the middle for an inkwell. I learned to read and write at the Colony with Mr. Marcelino.

Students had to study hard to avoid failing. After classes ended around 11 p.m., things got rowdy, and notes were sent to the foster parents. I came to the pavilion when I was 12. I didn't want to stay with my foster parents. I liked working. I handed in a lot of notes because I was a bit of a troublemaker. There was a party to hand out report cards. I put a lot of effort into it because it was an incentive for students. They asked questions.

There were lots of gifts. I received a watch and other toys (a bus, a plane, and a police car). I was Mr. José.

The narratives reveal aspects of the organization of school spaces, the encouragement of study, and the disciplinary practices applied to students considered "troublemakers." According to Goffman (1998), these punishments, because they are public, become social facts. Note that until 1966, the hospital directors administered this school. When the Franciscan Sisters of Mary took over the administration in 1966, the school underwent minor changes, such as adopting a more structured approach in a dedicated space. The nuns deemed it inappropriate to share spaces with other sectors, such as the prison and administration. In addition to the curriculum content, this school incorporated the principles of civility, religiosity, and good manners. From a sociological perspective, the practices carried out were marked by constant surveillance as a form of subjectivation and behavioral adaptation, consistent with Elias's (1994) description of the civilizing process. Thus, the social image of the inmate is progressively redefined. Initially seen as a subversive subject, he is ultimately constituted as an obedient inmate capable of adjusting his behavior to institutional norms and demonstrating conformity to the social order established within the colony.

The third school (starting in 1969)

The Violeta de Matos Areosa School, the result of a project by the Franciscan Sisters to reorganize the Colony's interior spaces, has improved facilities, including two classrooms, a restroom, and a kitchenette. The school was named in honor of the governor, Sr. Danilo de Matos Areosa, and his wife, Violeta de Matos Areosa[4]. The school received assistance from the first lady, who donated toys and bicycles for recreational activities. This reinforced the school's educational and welfare-oriented nature.

Considering this context as a school setting allows us to identify the different power relations at play. The teacher held the greatest power because he possessed knowledge and was responsible for discipline and transmitting knowledge. In this sense, teaching authority involved intentional action in which education, religiosity, and social discipline were intertwined in the formation of individuals deemed suitable for social coexistence.

After the hospital colony was decommissioned, the school came under the jurisdiction of the Municipal Department of Education (Semed/Manaus), and Mr. Raimundo Gomes Batista served as its first principal. That same year, in addition to regular instruction, a supplementary education class was established for the evening shift. Following the closure, the neighborhood's population grew, increasing student demand and necessitating the establishment of an annex near the school where the former cafeteria for ex-inmates[5] had been located. The annex temporarily housed four classrooms, operating during morning and afternoon shifts.

[4] According to information from the Durango Duarte Institute, the then-first lady of the state, Violeta Mattos Areosa, held a Christmas party in 1969 for former residents of the Antônio Aleixo Colony, which included the inauguration of the school and recreation center and the distribution of toys, clothing, food, and televisions. Violeta Areosa's idea was to name the school "São José," but the residents and the nuns did not accept the suggestion, preferring to name it after the first lady in recognition of her work on behalf of that leprosarium. The symbolic ribbon was cut by engineers João Loureiro (secretary of public works) and João Teixeira, director of SVOP. (Jornal do Comércio, December 17, 1969, p. 8). Available at: https://idd.org.br/acervo/50a-semana-de-1969/. Accessed on: June 1, 2020.

[5] In 2026, the space previously occupied by the school was being used as a rehabilitation center.

3.1.4 The “Lago” School

Most of the interviewees had little information about the “Lago School.” Since most arrived in the 1960s or later, they only remember the Violeta de Matos Areosa School. We obtained information from Professor Ernesto, the only surviving teacher who taught at the school during the period of isolation. The school was made of wood and had only one classroom. It was located near Lake Aleixo. The school was intended for the children of patients expelled from the wards of the Antonio Aleixo leprosarium, as well as for people who were staying there. Still, the disease did not afflict it—the colony-hospital funded it through the charity fund. The teacher recounts facts about his life, the school's operations, educational support, and teacher training.

I arrived at the age of 12 on March 20, 1956. I’m still confined to the same place, trapped by the disease. My feet practically have no toes. The Nossa Senhora das Graças school was founded during the sisters' time. I spent time at the preventorium, where children of patients with Hansen's disease were kept—children who were born but could not be raised. Dona Isabel was the director there. I was a tailor by trade. I learned the trade here in the colony from Temístocles and Adelina. I worked at Geraldo da Rocha as a tailor, making whatever was needed, including sheets and pajamas for patients, as well as police uniforms. I also took on private work. The nuns created an "alternative" school. During the time of isolation, there were two schools: one at the leprosarium and one by the lake. The school by the lake had only one classroom. I started working at that school in 1971, but other teachers had already worked there, specifically for those who lived nearby. Some patients rebelled and didn’t obey the Franciscan sisters' orders. There was a village called Vila Garrelo nearby. Some wanted to get married, but the sisters wouldn’t allow it. They set up a school even for those considered rebels. In 1971, there were three teachers. I only worked the morning shift, which averaged 30 to 35 students. The school operated on three shifts. The classes were mixed, with some students having Hansen’s disease and others being healthy. The sisters always asked us to get checked out and diagnosed, and some students already had sequelae. Not all of them had sequelae, just a few. The school's name was actually Nossa Senhora das Graças, and it had been founded earlier during the isolation period. The sisters ran the school and handled the agreements with the Manaus city government. I was teaching and learning. I learned through the radio. I finished middle school, but couldn’t complete high school because I failed two subjects. After the school closed, I stopped teaching. (emphasis added).

Even though they disapproved of many inmates' behavior, the Franciscan Sisters established an "alternative" school, as the teacher explained. The decision to encourage students to attend school was consistent in the testimonies we heard, even in cases where the sisters did not “administer” the school. However, according to the professor’s account, they knew that education would open doors. There is no precise date for the school’s inauguration based solely on oral sources, which date back to before 1971. The teacher later suggests the possible date of 1966.[6]

The existence of the so-called "Lake School" suggests that the social organization of the Antonio Aleixo leprosarium was more complex than it seemed, marked by internal distinctions between individuals who were more or less compliant with institutional norms. While the “official” school in the leprosarium's center served those integrated into the colony’s disciplinary order, the alternative school, remote and isolated, was intended for inmates who resisted the Franciscan Sisters' rules. These inmates were outsiders among outsiders. From an Eliasian perspective, education not only instructs but also

[6] We found this same information in the Educational Policy Statement of Nossa Senhora das Graças Municipal School.

symbolically redefines the patient's image within that figurational dynamic. This enables the patient's reconstruction as a civilized subject, even if they are situated in an inferior position within the figuration itself.

Professor Ernesto points out that he was not the first teacher to work there, indicating that a school calendar had already been organized in previous years.

I attended that school from 1971 to 1975. In 1976, I was transferred to Violeta School, where I worked until 1978. The nun called me the "Teacher at the Edge of the Ravine" because you had to climb over a huge ravine to get there. It feels good to pass on knowledge and experiences to others.

It's a feeling of joy and comfort. There were some conflicts, and sometimes we had to assert our authority. True educators teach and prepare people for life. Education does that, but it also needs family support. Parents need to monitor their children's behavior to see if they're making progress and what they can do to improve. Sometimes, when I asked parents why their children weren't coming, they'd tell us, "We have more important things. We have work." I worked as a teacher in the morning and in administration in the afternoon. In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king! When she called me to teach, only an elementary school existed. I taught everyone in a multi-grade class. I had to teach all the subjects.

Although Teacher Ernesto's narrative seems simple, it reveals complexities in the practice of teaching. It prompts reflections on the historically precarious nature of teaching. He pursues personal fulfillment and faces difficulties in navigating existing power dynamics. During the interview, Teacher Ernesto noted that he had difficulty transitioning to teaching, but one of the nuns, Sister Ângela, guided him and answered his questions. He recalls one such moment: "One day, I wrote 'obediência' with a silent b, and she crossed it out and corrected me. They came several times, accompanied by the priest." Speaking of his experience at the Colony, he mentioned that he was hired as a nursing assistant after it closed down, which is why he did not pursue a career as a teacher. He retired in 1986 and has rarely gone out for walks since then. He believes that living at the Colony was not "that bad" (his expression).

It was an adaptation process that led to a job opportunity and, later, retirement.

Sometimes, around six o'clock, I felt like running off to the Gustavo Capanema building because I missed my parents. I felt that way here, too. However, I agree with Barreto that he would have already died if he hadn't come to the hospital. Despite everything, I had an opportunity to study a little, which my relatives in the countryside didn't have. The brothers of mine who survived in the countryside are illiterate. My sister taught me the alphabet, and at the Rio Mar Pavilion—now the Sandra Braga—they offered schooling and carpentry classes. I studied there and became a teacher at the Colony. Even though I was "locked up"—and still feel that way today—I feel good here. Sometimes I go for a swim, but I feel restricted. I don't swim with healthy people—I just splash around with my cute little feet[7]. There was a "silly" guy here who would jump into the pool with his big shoes on. People went all out. They went wild. I saw a lot in this old leprosarium. People died right next to me. Before the sisters arrived, many people died. I would say there were three distinct periods here: From 1942 (before the sisters arrived), during the sisters' time, and afterward. Before the sisters arrived, it was a very difficult time with no treatment and a lot of mutilation. During the sisters' time, there was a significant improvement. After the sisters left, chaos ensued. The sisters invaded every aspect of the hospital, including the patients themselves.

[7] More than just a narrative highlight, we understand that this testimony demonstrates that the condition of being "sick" extends beyond the biomedical dimension of healing, remaining inscribed in the body and in social relationships. The physical and symbolic sequelae of leprosy contribute to the persistence of an identity socially marked by stigma, even after the disease has run its course.

Even as the interview was drawing to a close, Professor Ernesto continued to talk about his experience with isolation and his view of the school today. Perhaps the interview had awakened his memories, as he hadn't spoken about his life as a teacher in a long time. He wore a broad smile as he recognized himself as a central figure in many people's lives. According to Bosi (1994), memory is an infinite reservoir, and some information only surfaces after the interview—during coffee breaks, on the stairs, in the garden, or when saying farewell at the gate. This is what happened with Professor Ernesto, who, toward the end of the interview, shared many of his confidences, fears, joys, and faith. One memory led to another. In light of this, research is an emotional endeavor built on connections.

Contrary to policies governing access to basic education until the end of the 20th century, which were characterized by limited access for only a portion of society, particularly the elite, the schooling of people affected by leprosy provided former patients with experiences they might never have had outside isolation. This is just one example of why public education policies must be maintained and expanded. Situations such as a community of people affected by leprosy can lead us to reflect on other situations with similar dynamics. Education was an important path, as we have seen. For many, it was the main path. Thus, we must always fight for the expansion of such opportunities and better working conditions, even in challenging situations when investments are threatened.

In general, experiences with basic schooling emerged from the social circumstances of former inmates, reflecting the transition from an education tied to isolation to one integrated into urban life and public education policies.

In this effort to provide basic education, we see that the education received at the leprosarium was not just about literacy, but also part of a broader project to prepare people for work. Between the 1940s and 1980s, a period of industrialization and the consolidation of conservative modernization policies in Brazil, vocational education played a strategic role in workforce training. Historically, this training was primarily aimed at the working classes.

According to Frigotto and Ciavatta (2003), Brazilian vocational education was structured amid the tension between holistic human development and instrumental preparation for work. This education was often guided by individuals' adaptation to predefined social positions.

In this sense, the educational experiences developed in the leprosarium can be interpreted as part of this historical configuration. While these experiences expanded the inmates' possibilities for survival and autonomy, they also responded to the institutional need for discipline, productive occupation, and controlled social reintegration.

Vocational Education at the Leprosarium

The vocational education program developed within the Antônio Aleixo leprosarium can be linked to the historical process of Brazilian institutional initiatives aimed at training socially vulnerable individuals. As De Freitas Gurgel (2023) demonstrates in his analysis of the School for Apprentice Artisans (1858) and the School for Artisan Apprentices (1909), vocational education in Brazil has historically been directed toward people with low incomes and those considered "helpless," combining elementary education and practical training under a set of pedagogical mechanisms aimed at controlling spaces, times, and bodies. Thus, the vocational training offered to inmates cannot be interpreted exclusively as an opportunity for emancipation, but rather as part of a broader educational project that, while producing concrete possibilities for work and social recognition, also operated as a mechanism for social organization and the adaptation of individuals to the conditions imposed by isolation and the prevailing institutional order.

Throughout the social history of the establishment of Brazilian leprosariums, we note the significant presence of vocational training programs. Some courses were formal and offered certification, while others took place in settings considered non-formal but still generated opportunities and income.

Certainly, the primary objective of the vocational education implemented within these spaces was to train residents to practice a profession, so that, in addition to generating income for them, they would occupy their minds with some activity, or realize that in that place, even with the experience of illness, there was a space for social interaction. In this sense, the work also assumed symbolic and social functions, producing forms of sociability and redefining the experience of illness by allowing subjects to recognize themselves as active participants, as shown in the figure below.

Figure 1 - Students receiving their Nursing Assistant certificates.

Source: Maria do Carmo Fontes' personal collection.

The image above shows one of the most popular courses offered at the leprosarium, the nursing assistant program. Even before the Franciscan Sisters arrived at the Antônio Aleixo Colony, this course was already being taught by "healthy" nurses. The goal was not only to train the patients but also to enable them to care for one another by performing tasks such as giving injections, administering medications, checking blood pressure, conducting blood glucose tests, and performing bed baths, among other basic nursing techniques. According to Law No. 2,604/1955, residents could work as "nursing practitioners" without specific training. However, this changed with Law No. 7,498/1986, which reclassified these roles as "occupational" and described the activities as "basic nursing tasks."

After the Franciscan Sisters joined the program in 1966, the nursing assistant course became more purposeful and pedagogically rigorous. Former interns reveal that they were concerned with the balance of theory and practice. They did not want the course to be taught solely through practical training. On scheduled days, sessions were held outside of practical training environments, such as in classrooms, where specific content on human anatomy and biosafety was covered. Below are some testimonials regarding the professionalization of the interns.

My job within the colony was as a nursing assistant. Our duties included giving injections, administering medication to the sickest patients, applying dressings, and assisting with surgeries and childbirth. Healthy doctors and nurses constantly surrounded me. I didn't look sick. I learned this from nurses Cazuza and Ana Maria. The nurses didn't perform these

minor procedures; the patients did them themselves. In the morning, we worked in the ward for bedridden patients and in the ward for older women. I went to the outpatient clinic to learn how to administer IVs and injections. I worked in the operating room, the delivery room, and the outpatient clinic. Wherever they sent me, I went. Nurse Cazuza held meetings with us. 12 interns were working in nursing. I went to people's homes. He kept a notebook for each area listing people's names, schedules, and medication names. That's how he assigned us to patients, like Dona Amora.

Back when the nuns were there, patients in better physical condition took care of one another. There were dressing stations, a pharmacy, and labs. Some patients were trained to assist with clinical tests. I took the nursing assistant course and have the certificate, which is quite small. However, I received the certificate with the wrong name on it. The nuns taught the classes, and we went to Violeta's classroom. We took written and practical exams. On a certain day, we went to the hospital to take the practical exam, which included making beds and other tasks. The only reason I didn't work in healthcare is that I didn't want to (Amélia).

The sisters made people study. She taught the nursing course herself. There was a classroom. Classes were held in the building where the movie theater was located. They taught us everything about the human body. My course had a workload of 48 hours (Dona Rosa).

When I arrived, I started working. I was a nurse. They were strict, but it was for the greater good. I took two courses with them. Someone from Sesau taught the courses. There was a theoretical component and a practical component taught by Professor Oscar. Based on the above accounts, we understand that these were short-term qualification courses, which were the classification used at the time. According to Dona Rosa, the courses had a 48-hour workload, qualifying them only as short-term qualification courses rather than structured technical training. However, it is worth noting that even after completing the course, the nuns, or "trained" nurses, continued to guide former residents in basic nursing procedures. It was an opportunity for ongoing health education that integrated teaching and service.

They consider themselves "nurses" because they perform care, promotion, and prevention activities, particularly in medication administration, thereby improving primary care. Once trained, the former residents were held accountable as well. Dona Rosa recalls being "called out" by one of the nuns for not wanting to practice nursing.

There was a time when we were short-staffed. She said: "Some people think we don't spend time or resources; they think we just want to keep our certificates and not work. They act all high and mighty."

When a nurse gets sick, we scramble to find a replacement. I told her, "Look, Sister, I can help out for up to 15 days, but no more than that. I have a foot problem, and you know my husband can't help. He can't even pour coffee into a mug."

Clearly, the nursing assistant played an important role in the Colony. Before, many people fell ill or died due to improper medication dosages and schedules, or refusal to take medication because of side effects. Under the nuns' administration, however, a systematic organization was established, including quality healthcare processes. In his research, Alves (2011, p. 55) interviewed one of the Franciscan sisters about the training of the nursing assistants.

It turned out that they began filling positions within the colony. There were no outsiders, only drivers.

In 1971, we formed a group of nursing assistants and trained 30 to 40 patients to dress wounds. We taught them everything about nursing. We also secured a commitment from the government to hire these patients, which served as their retirement.

In addition to the nursing assistant course, the Colony implemented other courses, such as Sewing and Tailoring, Crochet, Embroidery, Carpentry, Painting, Plumbing, Clinical

Laboratory Assistant, and Physical Therapy Assistant. Dona Janete fondly remembers the Physical Therapy Assistant course, to which she dedicated herself "body and soul."

I learned physical therapy techniques from the nuns. I'm overweight today because of my illness. I learned how to perform them wonderfully well. The Rio Negro players used to come here for physical therapy. The sisters had to be trained since they couldn't enter because of their attire. They adapted to the setting and requested permission to wear long pants. Sisters Fernanda and Ruth were almost like doctors since they knew so much. The course lasted several months, and we studied theory and practiced simultaneously. I took the course in 1974, and we received a certificate. We helped people stretch their legs and arms (Dona Janete).

According to her, the physical therapy department was the most modern in Manaus, so much so that players from Rio Negro, one of Manaus's teams, would travel to the Colony to undergo treatment.

Seeing patients arrive in pain, unable to straighten their knees, moved me. We worked with them until they could stand up. One patient is still alive in Manacapuru. He arrived as a child and couldn't walk at all. We helped him learn to walk. We gave him massages every day until his joints developed. Today, he's a family man with a special affection for us.

It was a good time. If it weren't for the physical therapy provided by those priests, who also trained patients to become professionals, how many would have remained disabled without help? When he arrived, he was stiff and covered in wounds, but they managed to turn things around. We had paraffin. Today, when I look at physical therapy centers, I see that they don't have nearly as much as we did. We had a fully equipped gym, infrared therapy, and a CT scanner. There was no physical therapy center in Manaus like the one at the Colony. The Rio Negro team would come here because no one in Manaus was competent enough to train the students. The patients also cared for the healthy ones, such as the players. We were already doing physical therapy on mattresses. The players weren't afraid at all. They did paraffin treatments with us. We didn't separate theory from practice. She gave us things to study, but we didn't have notebooks. She wrote on the blackboards, and we had sheets of 40-gram paper that she cut into worksheets. We wrote down our lesson for the day and put it there. The exams were practical (Dona Janete).

She speaks of a place that touched and transformed her, and of an experience that took on new meaning.

This place helped her overcome her difficulties and achieve a new sense of purpose, proving that she could face the challenges she encountered. Listening to her, we get the impression that the physical therapy setting was one of the most significant places for her. Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she spoke.

The world of work and vocational education were closely related within the Colony. Dona Ester stated that she enjoyed working and performing various roles within the colony. She was a seamstress, embroiderer, kitchen helper, nursing assistant, and farmer. "I was never the type to hang around other people's homes.

We had to work; otherwise, we would have gone without, since meals were very limited," she said. Mr. Herculano worked as an ambulance driver and recounts in great detail how he entered the profession.

I worked as a shoemaker for 14 years just before becoming a nun. I taught myself the trade and later learned to drive. I retired as a state driver. There was a priest here, Friar Miller, who always kept an eye on me. One day, his car broke down, and I had already studied mechanics. He said, "Fix my car and bring it back." That's when I got the opportunity. I got the car running, hopped in, and took off. On weekends, he gave me his car to do repairs. Then, I went to get my driver's license, which was difficult because of Law 610, which stated that people with Hansen's disease could not hold a driver's license. I argued, "I'm not a patient anymore. Here's my health card. I have physical disabilities, but the law says that when a person

has a disability that doesn't prevent them from driving, the DMV has to take that into account." When I took the road test, a social worker, a psychologist, and a general practitioner accompanied me. They saw that I drove normally. At the time, I was entitled to a five-year license, but they gave me a one-year one. It even said: "Fit to drive without remuneration," meaning I couldn't be a state employee. I wrote a letter to Contran, made a copy, and then the DMV order came to replace it with a standard license.

At the end of some of his stories, Mr. Herculano always emphasizes the phrase, "We only succeeded because we fought." Without that, he says, there is a tendency toward isolation. He points out that this social isolation is worse than physical isolation. After their military discharge, their experiences and vocational training certifications helped them secure positions as public servants in the Departments of Health and Education. One of the courses that contributed to their placement in administrative roles was typing. One of the interviewees strongly emphasized its importance.

Figure 2 - Students in the typing course.

Source: Delvanir Lopes' Personal Collection

Based on the accounts presented, it is evident that the training programs offered at the Colony were more akin to short-term vocational courses than to comprehensive vocational training programs. With a reduced course load and a strong practical focus, these courses were intended primarily for the immediate performance of tasks necessary for institutional operations. They excluded broader training processes aimed at building autonomous career paths. From this perspective, the inmates began to identify themselves as "nurses" and caregivers. As Frigotto and Ciavatta (2003) point out, historically, vocational education for marginalized groups has prioritized training for immediate job performance, emphasizing operational skills over a well-rounded education. Thus, continued guidance after the courses reflects a dynamic similar to that of in-service continuing education. However, it also indicates mechanisms of accountability and moral pressure on the trained individuals. This suggests that the qualification simultaneously served as an opportunity for social integration and a strategy for regulating behavior within the asylum setting.

Another possible interpretation is that vocational education was a means of keeping the inmates of the Antonio Aleixo Hospital-Colony occupied to prevent rebellions or popular uprisings. Furthermore, it strengthened the network of interdependence by forming small social groups that expanded acts of solidarity and friendship.

We agree with Frigotto and Ciavatta (2003) that education for the working class prioritizes functional adaptation to work. This adaptation is guided by values such as discipline, productivity, and employability. The result is what Frigotto and Ciavatta call the "productive citizen": a worker adapted to the social needs of production with limited broader educational possibilities. In the context of the leprosarium, this logic manifested in specific ways: professionalization served as both a survival strategy and a mechanism of social normalization. It redefined the image of patients as useful, disciplined inmates who could help maintain the institution. Thus, the vocational education offered there was permeated by a fundamental issue: it opened up concrete possibilities for work and autonomy while reinforcing processes of adaptation and social control.

Final considerations

Drawing from the presented narratives, this article aims to recover often-silenced memories and contribute to a better understanding of education's role in exclusionary contexts. By giving a voice to individuals who have experienced leprosy and isolation, the article aims to encourage critical reflection on educational practices and their transformative potential, even in vulnerable situations.

Schooling is a fundamental component of the civilizing process and a social and political necessity. As Matos and Rocha Ferreira (2019, p. 374) emphasize, "The model of education and its role in the formation of the individual are only comprehensible when linked to the process of societal development and to the way in which the nation is integrated into the conception of education." The analyzed narratives demonstrate that the education provided was largely linked to practical pedagogy and the institution's internal demands. This resulted in limited social integration, yet was not devoid of meaning for the former residents. They reframed these experiences as opportunities for recognition and dignity. Thus, this study contributes to our understanding of schooling and professionalization as social phenomena marked by tensions between control and emancipation. It reveals that education served as an important mediator in the reconstruction of identities and the production of meanings about oneself and the social world, even in restrictive contexts.

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