



**Italian Presence in South America, Brazil, and São Paulo:
data and interpretations from official yearbooks¹**

Presença italiana na América do Sul, no Brasil e em São Paulo:
dados e interpretações dos anuários

Presencia italiana en América del Sur, Brasil y São Paulo:
datos e interpretaciones de los anuarios oficiales

Renata Brião de Castro
Universidade de São Paulo (Brasil); Università degli Studi di Macerata (Itália)
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5724-6621>
<https://lattes.cnpq.br/8866766022973381>
renatab.castro@gmail.com

Abstract

This article analyzes the presence and distribution of Italian government-subsidized schools during the 1920s, based on the yearbooks of Italian schools abroad. Adopting a quantitative approach, the study first presents a continental overview of South American countries, highlighting those with the highest number of enrolled students, and then focuses on the Brazilian case, particularly the state of São Paulo. It examines the number of schools, the evolution of enrollments throughout the decade, the differences between capital and interior regions, and the participation of boys and girls, with emphasis on the role of religious congregations in girls' education. The article also discusses the impact of school nationalization policies on this educational network. By gathering and interpreting this data, the study contributes to the understanding of Italian educational policy abroad within migratory contexts.

Keywords: Italian immigration; Schools abroad; History of education; São Paulo; Educational statistics.

¹ English version by S. Iacovacci Translation Service. E-mail: siacovacci@gmail.com.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a presença e a distribuição das escolas italianas subsidiadas pelo governo italiano durante a década de 1920, com base nos anuários dessas escolas no exterior. A partir de uma abordagem quantitativa, o estudo apresenta inicialmente um panorama continental dos países sul-americanos, destacando os países com maior número de alunos matriculados, para então concentrar-se no caso brasileiro e, mais especificamente, no estado de São Paulo. São analisados o número de escolas, a evolução das matrículas ao longo da década, as diferenças entre o capital e o interior e a participação de meninas e meninos, com destaque para o papel das congregações religiosas na educação feminina. O artigo também discute o impacto das políticas de nacionalização do ensino sobre essa rede escolar. Ao reunir e interpretar esses dados, a pesquisa contribui para a compreensão da política educativa italiana no exterior em contextos migratórios.

Palavras-chave: Imigração italiana; Escolas no exterior; História da educação; São Paulo; Estatísticas educacionais.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la presencia y la distribución de las escuelas italianas subvencionadas por el gobierno italiano durante la década de 1920, a partir de los anuarios de las escuelas italianas en el exterior. Con un enfoque cuantitativo, el estudio presenta inicialmente un panorama continental de los países sudamericanos, destacando aquellos con mayor número de alumnos matriculados, y luego se centra en el caso brasileño y, en particular, en el estado de São Paulo. Se analizan el número de escuelas, la evolución de las matrículas a lo largo de la década, las diferencias entre el capital y el interior, y la participación de niñas y niños, con énfasis en el papel de las congregaciones religiosas en la educación femenina. El artículo también analiza el impacto de las políticas de nacionalización de la enseñanza en esta red escolar. Al reunir e interpretar estos datos, la investigación contribuye a comprender la política educativa italiana en el exterior en contextos migratorios.

Palabras clave: Migración italiana; Escuelas en el exterior; Historia de la educación; São Paulo; Estadísticas educativas.

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Introduction²

The phenomenon of Italian migration to various parts of the world has been the subject of numerous studies examining it from multiple perspectives and analytical approaches. As Donna Gabaccia (2003) summarizes, Italian emigration did not result in a single diaspora but rather multiple, temporary, and ever-changing ones. These diasporas were composed of individuals who often identified as natives of specific regions, such as Sicily, Piedmont, or Veneto, rather than as "Italians." At the onset of large-scale emigration in the late nineteenth century, most emigrants did not speak the national language and were unfamiliar with the Italian state and its institutions. Therefore, they were far from constituting a cohesive identity. According to Gabaccia, no other people migrated in as many directions as the Italians. Rosoli (1992), on the other hand, emphasizes the geographic scope of the Italian diaspora, which reached nearly every continent. The figures are striking: "Between 1876 and 1885, well over one million Italians applied for emigration. Well over two million did so in the following decade, and more than four million did so between 1896 and 1905" (Gabaccia, 2003, p. 68, our translation). Between 1870 and 1970, approximately 26 million people are estimated to have left Italy to live in other countries. Emigration was part of the social fabric of populations on the Italian Peninsula, serving as both a strategy for economic survival and an intergenerational way of life (Gabaccia, 2003). Starting in the 1870s, the phenomenon reached an unprecedented scale.

According to the *Annuario Statistico dell'Emigrazione Italiana*, a publication by the Commissariato Generale dell'Emigrazione, the Americas received the largest number of Italians between 1876 and 1925 (1926). The United States, Argentina, and Brazil emerged as the three main destinations in this context. Brazil and Argentina led immigration flows within South America, but other countries, such as Uruguay, Chile, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, also welcomed significant numbers of Italians. In these different national contexts, immigrants organized themselves into charitable and mutual-aid associations and founded newspapers, cultural clubs, and especially schools. These institutions served as spaces for linguistic and cultural preservation and also functioned as instruments of Italy's foreign and diplomatic policy, with symbolic and ideological implications.

These schools served as spaces for linguistic and cultural preservation. However, they also functioned as instruments of Italy's foreign and diplomatic policy, carrying symbolic and ideological implications. In Brazil, particularly in the southern and southeastern states, these institutions were organized and maintained by immigrant associations and religious orders. In some cases, they received subsidies from the Italian government (Barausse, 2015). Despite their historical, cultural, and educational importance, systematic, empirically grounded studies of the network of Italian schools abroad are lacking, particularly in terms of their detailed geographical distribution and quantitative scope. These schools existed in significant numbers, operated for decades, and were important to many communities in diverse contexts. However, the absence of precise mapping limits our understanding of their scope and impact (Castro, 2023). In addition to quantifying this school network, it is important to understand the Italian government's strategies for engaging with immigrant communities, mechanisms for fostering a sense of Italian identity abroad, and ways schools were mobilized as instruments of cultural, political, and symbolic presence outside national territory. Thus, the figures analyzed here are traces of broader historical and educational processes related to migratory, associative, and educational dynamics.

² This article is part of a research project that seeks to identify, catalog, and analyze Italian didactic textbooks used in Italian schools in Brazil and Argentina during the 20 years of the fascist regime. This research is funded by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) (No. 2023/16884-7 and No. 2022/15183-2).

This article therefore seeks to contribute to this field of study through a quantitative analysis of the yearbooks of Italian schools abroad, known as the *Annuari delle Scuole Italiane all'Estero*, which were published by the Italian government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Salveti, 2002). These yearbooks served as tools for documenting, monitoring, and projecting Italy's presence abroad. They produced an institutional representation of the school network linked to the "Italianness" policy developed by the Italian state. Thus, the data in these documents should not be viewed as neutral reflections of school life in emigrant communities but rather as constructions based on specific political, administrative, and diplomatic criteria. From the perspective of cultural history and the theoretical contributions of the *Annales* school, particularly Jacques Le Goff's reflections on the concept of documents and monuments, it is essential to question the status of these sources as "official documents." Yearbooks do not function as faithful, passive mirrors of reality but rather as artifacts intentionally constructed by the state to legitimize its power and establish an official memory. Viewing the yearbook as a monument enables us to move beyond the uncritical and hierarchical distinction between the "official" and the "unofficial." This approach reveals that the decisions about what to record, as well as the omissions and silences regarding autonomous community initiatives, were integral to the context in which the document was produced. Therefore, they were also part of the Italian government's intention to construct an "Italianness" through educational institutions at the time.

Historiography has emphasized the important role of religious institutions in preserving national identity abroad. As Sani (2021, pp. 8–9) points out, long before the period analyzed here, the Catholic Church provided emigrants with a sense of community and cultural identity, creating a dense network of schools and hospitals linked to parishes and missions. Schooling was considered inseparable from cultural preservation. For example, the founding charter of the Missionaries of St. Charles (Scalabrinians) prioritized establishing schools to teach the basics of the faith to the children of settlers (Sani, 2021). It is through this network of social interaction that school yearbooks gain their historical significance.

The main focus is on Brazil, particularly the state of São Paulo, where most Italian educational institutions in Brazil are located. However, the scope of the research has been expanded to include data from other South American countries, such as Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Peru, and Ecuador, to provide an integrated view of Italian educational policy outside Europe, specifically in South America.

Thus, the article aims to map the presence of Italian schools in different Brazilian states, analyze the São Paulo network in detail, and situate the Brazilian case within the broader South American context. To achieve these goals, the article compiles and systematizes data using quantitative analyses and graphical visualizations. This study also aims to stimulate further research on Italian schools' operations in immigration contexts from various perspectives, including pedagogical, institutional, political, and cultural. The empirical foundation established in this article is expected to inform more in-depth studies of curricula, school practices, didactic materials, teacher profiles, and relationships with local educational systems.

To achieve these objectives, the article is divided into four sections, in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The first section discusses the sources used and the methodological criteria adopted. The second section provides an overview of Italian schools in South America. The third section examines the Brazilian case with an emphasis on state-level data. The fourth section provides a more profound analysis of São Paulo. Finally, the text presents concluding considerations in which the results are reflected upon, and possible avenues for further research are suggested.

1. Sources and Methodology

The main sources used are the yearbooks of Italian schools abroad published by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These documents were created to record the network of educational institutions established or maintained by the Italian state outside its national territory. The yearbooks are published annually and provide data such as the school's name, location (country, city, and sometimes neighborhood), type of governing body (associative, religious, or state-run), number of students, level of education, and occasionally, information on teachers and didactic materials (Salveti, 2002). For this article, we analyzed the yearbooks from 1921–1922, 1924, 1925, 1927, and 1930. The choice of this temporal and geographic scope is due to several factors. First, this article is part of a larger study that examines Italian schools and didactic textbooks in the context of São Paulo. This is because São Paulo was the Brazilian state that received the largest number of Italian immigrants. The temporal scope pertains to the early years of Benito Mussolini's government in Italy. This allows us to understand how these policies circulated transnationally among countries with Italian immigrants. The Italian school movement took a new direction with the rise of fascism in 1922 when the government began investing heavily in the formation and ideological control of Italian identity abroad, using schools as one of its main instruments. Furthermore, this period remains relatively unexplored in the historiography of Italian schools abroad. This is especially true about quantitative and territorial analyses of these institutions, as well as specific, mapped analyses of the didactic textbooks produced and circulated at that time (Castro, 2023, 2025).

This source was chosen for its official and systematic nature, which enables the construction of a comparable empirical basis over time and across countries and regions. These sources combine technical records and political agendas. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this type of document. In this sense, yearbooks are official documents that reflect the Italian state's interests in mapping, organizing, and legitimizing its activities among emigrant communities. The yearbooks also produced a specific representation of the Italian educational presence abroad, highlighting certain institutions. Thus, the data in the yearbooks must be interpreted in light of the political, diplomatic, and institutional conditions under which they were produced. As Jacques Le Goff warns:

The document is not innocuous. It is, first and foremost, the result of a construction—whether conscious or unconscious—of the history, the era, and the society that produced it, but also of the successive eras during which it continued to exist, perhaps forgotten, and during which it continued to be manipulated, even if only through silence [...] it is up to the historian not to play the role of the naive observer (Le Goff, 1990, pp. 496-497).

We agree with the author's statement that neither the document nor its preservation is innocent. It is up to the researcher to avoid naivety when dealing with them. Documents are inert until someone examines them in relation to a research question. In this study, an examination of the *Annuari delle Scuole italiane all'estero* reveals that they are, in Le Goff's words, a veritable "construct" of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The data presented therein reflect the Italian government's institutional and diplomatic criteria. From this perspective, the data reflect the Italian government's institutional criteria for registration and recognition, which means not all schools attended by Italian children or founded by Italian communities were included. Many

educational experiences are not represented in this state-sanctioned classification. The omissions in these yearbooks are therefore historically significant. The absence of certain schools or regions should not automatically be interpreted as an absence of Italian educational practices. Rather, it indicates that the Italian government did not subsidize these schools and therefore did not appear in the records. It is also important to understand how these yearbooks were produced, what guidelines were used, and who collected and sent the data to the Italian ministry. Thus, the research is methodologically grounded in documentary analysis from Cellard's (2008) perspective. According to the author, analyzing documents comprehensively requires integrating a series of elements and assessing the context in which they were produced, their authors, the type of document, and how they were drafted. In the present study, this theoretical premise is applied by evaluating the authors and the production context. This means recognizing that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs compiled the yearbooks during the 1920s. This was a period marked by the rise of fascism and a reorientation of foreign policy. The government began to invest heavily in the ideological control of "Italianness." The yearbooks take the form of official statistical censuses constructed according to strict diplomatic and subsidy-granting criteria, which is the type and mode of documentary production. To analyze these sources, it is essential to examine the category of official documents critically. In light of the Annales School's contributions, particularly its expansion of the concept of historical sources, it becomes clear that the yearbooks are not mere repositories of passive data but rather "monuments" (Le Goff, 1990), intentionally constructed by the Italian state. According to the author, these documents/monuments must be approached. "Only the analysis of the document as a monument allows collective memory to recover it and the historian to use it scientifically—that is, with full knowledge of the facts" (Le Goff, 1990, p. 495). It is also necessary to consider the enormous variety of Italian ethnic school initiatives in Brazil, as the authors point out.

In this regard, it is necessary to consider the presence of a wide variety of agencies and actors dedicated to promoting ethnically based schools: rural community schools, urban schools, and those linked to mutual aid associations; private professors paid by families; parish and denominational schools; distinct colonial schools with close ties to consular authorities; and schools subsidized by state or municipal governments. Taken together, they reveal the complex role played by consular activities, religious institutions, local authorities, and families in promoting educational processes among immigrants and their descendants (Barausse; Luchese, 2017, pp. 35-36).

This finding reinforces the idea that the data presented reflect not only the actual presence of schools and enrollment figures but also the criteria adopted by the Italian government for granting subsidies to these institutions³. In this regard, it is important to note that the data in the yearbooks pertain to schools that received subsidies from the Italian government through the Ministero degli Affari Esteri, or to state schools established by the Italian government in Italian colonies. According to Italian researcher Patrizia Salvetti, Italian schools abroad were organized into two broad categories:

³ For the criteria for receiving subsidies, see: Castro (2024).

Italian schools abroad were divided into public and private schools, with the latter subsidized by the Italian government. The public schools were located in the Levant and the Mediterranean basin and were entirely government-funded. The private schools were either secular or religious and were established by Italian associations abroad. They received a government subsidy provided they adhered to the curricula and teaching methods of Italian schools. Consuls oversaw these schools and were subject to regular verification through ministerial inspections (Salveti, 2002, p. 536, our translation).

This distinction is essential for understanding the scope and limitations of the data analyzed in this study. The information in the yearbooks primarily reflects an official school network, i.e., one recognized and integrated into the Italian government's monitoring and funding system. For this reason, educational initiatives not funded by the state tend to be absent from these sources, even when locally relevant.

The methodology adopted in this study initially involved systematically collecting data from the consulted yearbooks, focusing on documents published during the period under analysis⁴. First, information regarding the various countries in South America was extracted and organized. Then, data on the various Brazilian states were collected. Finally, the study narrowed its focus to the state of São Paulo to provide an overview of the geographic distribution of these institutions. This organization made it possible to identify regional concentrations, quantitative variations, and differences in the intensity of Italian involvement across distinct South American migratory contexts. The data were organized into tables and graphical representations, enabling temporal and spatial comparisons among São Paulo municipalities. This study employs a methodological approach that, though historically under-explored in Brazilian educational historiography, is gaining recognition: the use of statistical data as a heuristic tool in analysis (Gil, 2007, 2019; Popkewitz & Lindblad, 2001). In this article, the quantitative data do not aim to produce a totalizing truth about the Italian school network in Brazil. Treating statistics as historical artifacts rather than merely auxiliary tools allows us to explore their political, institutional, and symbolic dimensions. From this perspective, the numbers are understood as historical constructions produced within specific institutional, administrative, and political contexts. Therefore, their analysis requires constant engagement with historiographical debates on immigration, associative organizations, national identity, and educational policies. In this sense, quantitative analysis complements, rather than replaces, qualitative approaches. It provides insights that can be further explored through in-depth interpretive studies. For instance, the distribution of Italian schools in Brazil opens the door to investigations into the composition of immigrant communities, the role of associative and religious networks, Italian foreign policy, and connections with national school systems.

2. Italian-funded schools in South America

As Italian historian Emilio Franzina (1995) pointed out, Italian emigration to Brazil was one chapter in the history of Italian emigration. Many people moved from Italy to Brazil, but it was just one of many countries that received a large influx of Italians seeking better living conditions. However, the consolidation of these communities did not occur solely on economic or demographic levels. The Italian presence in South America was also accompanied by the establishment of institutions responsible for maintaining cultural, linguistic, and identity-based

⁴⁴ It should be noted that the yearbooks used for this research are available at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Library in Rome and the National Central Library of Florence.

connections. Among these institutions, schools played a pivotal role. These institutions played a role in fostering a sense of collective belonging among immigrant populations marked by regional, linguistic, and cultural differences. They were more than just places for literacy education. The Italian presence in South America took root during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, establishing the region as one of the main destinations for Italian emigration. Argentina, in particular, stood out for receiving the largest number of Italians in the region. Many of them settled in Buenos Aires and the rural areas of the province (Devoto, 2007). Brazil, in turn, saw most Italian immigrants concentrated in the southern and southeastern states (Trento, 1998). Other countries that welcomed Italian immigrant communities include Peru, Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Colombia. These communities were often organized through family and associative networks. In this regard, we draw on Truzzi's (2008) studies of networks in immigration processes. According to the author, when analyzing immigration through the lens of networks, it is interesting to note that:

The key point is to seek, starting with each individual, to identify their network of relationships. Thus, the concept of networks conceives of society as a set of relationships and introduces a dimension of social structure understood as a structure of relationships—quite different from imagining it as structured according to aggregate categories. The adoption of a network perspective is of interest to all those concerned with migratory phenomena, both in the present and in the past [...] (Truzzi, 2008, p. 214).

The network perspective helps us understand that Italian migration processes were not limited to the movement of individuals but also involved the formation of associative, institutional, and cultural ties that structured forms of sociability in destination societies. In this context, Italian schools served as spaces for articulating these networks, functioning simultaneously as educational institutions, centers of ethnic sociability, and instruments of cultural mediation. The concept of networks helps us understand the immigration processes of Italians and the identity formed in the countries that received them:

Over the past ten years, scholars of emigration have increasingly emphasized the central role of social networks in the migration process. These networks, which are multidimensional and broader than individual migration chains, are considered essential infrastructure for the migration system as a whole (Rosoli, 1992, p. 7, our translation).

As Donna Gabaccia (2003) points out, Italian emigration resulted in "many diasporas," which are characterized by local identities, dialects, and regional ties. Though these communities are distinct from one another, they developed their own structures of social interaction and cultural preservation. In this text, we highlight Italian schools, institutions that became an expression of emigrant identity and an instrument of the Italian state's foreign policy. We might consider these schools educational institutions, as Portuguese researcher Justino Magalhães (2004) explains. In this context, creating and maintaining these institutions was understood as part of a broader strategy to project "Italianness" abroad. The concept of "Italianness" is examined through the studies of Truzzi (2016) and Zanini (2006). Zanini (2006) suggests that "Italianness" can be understood as the bonds of belonging between Italian immigrants and their descendants and the Italian homeland, the origin of their ancestors. This concept is considered a fluid construct that is constantly updated and reshaped, taking on different forms at various historical moments. Similarly, Oswaldo Truzzi (2016, p. 17) writes

that "Italianness cannot be viewed as a fixed and pre-established category; rather, it should be considered a form of identification constructed from the heterogeneous social experience of those referred to as 'Italians.'" In this regard, schools played a fundamental role in this process. Both Italian schools in Italy and Italian schools abroad were tasked with unifying the nation. Textbooks played a key role in these educational institutions. The quantitative data presented in the yearbooks allows us to partially observe the institutional manifestation of the process of identity construction and highlights the territorial reach achieved by Italian schools in South America. According to Oswaldo Truzzi (2016), while there was little sense of belonging to the newly unified Italian nation in their homeland, Italy, once Italians became immigrants, they came into contact with people of other nationalities and gradually recognized themselves as Italians. In this process of identity formation outside the national territory, Italian institutions abroad, particularly schools, played a fundamental role. In studying Italians in the interior of São Paulo state, Truzzi (2016) points to several factors that contributed to the formation of this Italian identity, including the press, ethnic schools, the ethnic associative movement, and the emergence of local elites (pp. 44–45).

South America emerged as a space for this activity due to the significant presence of Italian communities in various countries and associative and consular networks that could provide funding to establish these schools. Based on this discussion, this section provides a quantitative overview of subsidized Italian schools in South American countries during the 1920s. It highlights the number of enrolled students and the geographic distribution of these institutions over time. The data are organized in the table below:

Table 1 - Number of Students in Italian Schools in South America (1921–1930)

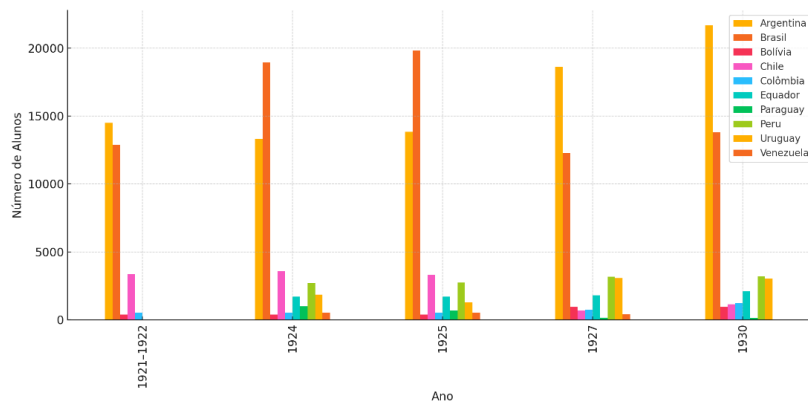
Country	1921–1922	1924	1925	1927	1930
Argentina	14489	13301	13841	18615	21691
Brazil	12867	18940	19806	12267	13820
Bolivia	375	375	375	935	935
Chile	3371	3564	3331	697	1140
Colombia	538	531	531	744	1226
Ecuador	-	1709	1699	1799	2104
Paraguay	-	989	687	157	131
Peru	-	2722	2746	3161	3191
Uruguay	-	1841	1260	3060	3045
Venezuela	-	531	531	401	-

Source: Data from the Yearbooks of Italian Schools Abroad (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1921–1930).

The data in the above table show the presence of Italian schools in South America throughout the 1920s. Although sources indicate significant fluctuations in enrolled student numbers, the overall information allows us to identify long-term trends and significant regional contrasts. These quantitative differences are not solely explained by the demographic size of Italian communities in each country but also by their varying capacities for associative organization, the relationships established between emigrant elites and the Italian state, and consular strategies for funding and institutional recognition. The asymmetry and numerical significance, particularly in Argentina and Brazil, gain greater interpretive depth when viewed through the lens of Oswaldo Truzzi's (2008) concept of networks in migratory processes. The more than 21,000 students in Argentina in 1930 and nearly 20,000 in Brazil in 1925 represent institutional manifestations of highly articulated transnational social networks that extend beyond the size of the Italian communities.

Emilio Franzina (2014) suggests that emigration to these South American regions was a central chapter in Italy's history. The state-subsidized schools functioned as central "nodes" of these networks. Through these schools, the Italian state relied on local emigrant elites and mutual aid associations to consolidate its diplomatic influence. Thus, the high enrollment rates reveal the success of Italian foreign policy in superimposing its official project of Italian identity onto the solidarity networks that immigrant communities had already organically woven.

Graph 1 - Changes in the number of students in South American countries between 1921 and 1930.



Source: Chart created by the author based on data from the Yearbooks of Italian Schools Abroad (*Ministero degli Affari Esteri*, 1921–1930).

This graph shows the numerical trends for each of the countries listed in the yearbooks. Of the 12 South American countries, the yearbooks provide data for 10: Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Argentina, in particular, shows continuous growth, reaching over 21,000 students by 1930. This growth is directly linked to the significant presence of the Italian community in Argentina. The maintenance of a high and relatively stable number of students suggests well-established institutions deeply integrated into the lives of Argentina's Italian communities. Beyond the numbers, Argentina's case demonstrates that schools played a pivotal role in preserving the language and fostering cultural connections among successive generations born outside Italy. Although Brazil shows more pronounced variations, it also has very significant numbers and stands out as one of the main hubs of the Italian educational network on the continent. The data imply that the Italian state's activities in Brazil were not uniform or spontaneous, but rather linked to the concentration of immigrant communities, the strength of local associative networks, the organization of those communities, and the Italian government's interest in maintaining cultural influence over populations of Italian origin. Brazil saw a peak in enrollment in 1925, with 19,806 students, followed by a noticeable decline to 12,267 in 1927 and a slight increase to 13,820 in 1930. This fluctuation may be linked to changes in how schools were listed in the yearbooks, the reconfiguration of officially recognized schools, or economic and political contexts impacting the management of these institutions. Thus, the quantitative fluctuations found in the yearbooks can be interpreted as reflecting how the Italian presence abroad was documented. The inclusion, exclusion, or reorganization of institutions depended on administrative and political criteria defined by the Italian state. Understanding periods of higher or lower enrollment alongside local circumstances, such as the opening of public schools, is important for understanding variations in attendance at Italian schools. However, this topic falls outside the scope of this article, though we intend to address it in future research.

Other countries, such as Chile, Peru, Uruguay, and Ecuador, have shown consistent numbers over the years, albeit on a smaller scale. For example, Peru shows continuous growth between 1924 and 1930, rising from 2,722 to 3,191 students. This indicates the expansion of the Italian educational network in Andean contexts, a topic that had been less evident in historiography until then. Ecuador is absent from the 1921–1922 records but appears in 1924 with over 1,700 students. It continues to grow through 1930, which may indicate a delay in receiving subsidies and consequently its later inclusion in the yearbooks. In countries with smaller Italian communities, such as Paraguay, Bolivia, and Venezuela, the number of schools is smaller but still indicates ongoing educational activities. Records show more than a hundred students in these countries. These data demonstrate the reach of Italian educational policy, even in countries with a less significant Italian presence. The number of enrolled students serves as an indicator of the density of the Italian school network outside of Europe. Thus, the presented data allow us to gauge the extent of the Italian school presence in South America throughout the 1920s. They highlight the concentration of Italian schools in countries such as Argentina and Brazil, as well as their presence in different national contexts. The analyzed data indicate the existence of Italian schools and suggest the formation of a transnational network of educational institutions linked to Italian cultural and diplomatic policy in the early 20th century.

3. Overview of Brazil

The Italian presence in Brazil intensified in the late 19th century. This influx of immigrants led to the formation of tightly organized communities in various states that sought to maintain ties with their culture of origin. These institutions fulfilled educational and linguistic functions, but they also served as spaces for social interaction, cultural mediation, and fostering a sense of collective belonging among emigrant groups. In this sense, Italian schools in Brazil are part of a broader network of institutions dedicated to preserving Italian identity and fostering ties between emigrant communities and the Italian state. Italian schools played a strategic role in preserving cultural identity and projecting the Italian state internationally. The Italian government began systematically investing in the creation, regulation, and funding of educational institutions for Italians abroad (Salveti, 2002; Floriani, 1984; Barausse, 2016; Castro, 2025; Luchese, 2017, 2019; Panizzolo, 2019; D'Alessio, 2022). The analyzed yearbooks provide an overview of the presence of Italian schools across different regions of Brazil. They reveal patterns of distribution and geographic concentration that largely mirror migratory flows and the organization of Italian communities within the country. Studies by Ascenzi et al. (2019) based on the same yearbooks demonstrate that Italian schools in Brazil were largely concentrated in the main Italian immigrant settlement areas. The data compiled by the authors highlight the central role of states such as São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul in structuring this educational network (Ascenzi et al., 2019). In the present study, we will examine this data more closely and analyze other categories, such as the number of schools and gender breakdown, with a greater focus on the 1920s.

The following table shows the number of students enrolled in Italian schools in different Brazilian states between 1921 and 1930, broken down by gender. The data reveal significant regional and temporal variations, as well as the relative participation of girls and boys in the Italian school system outside Italy.

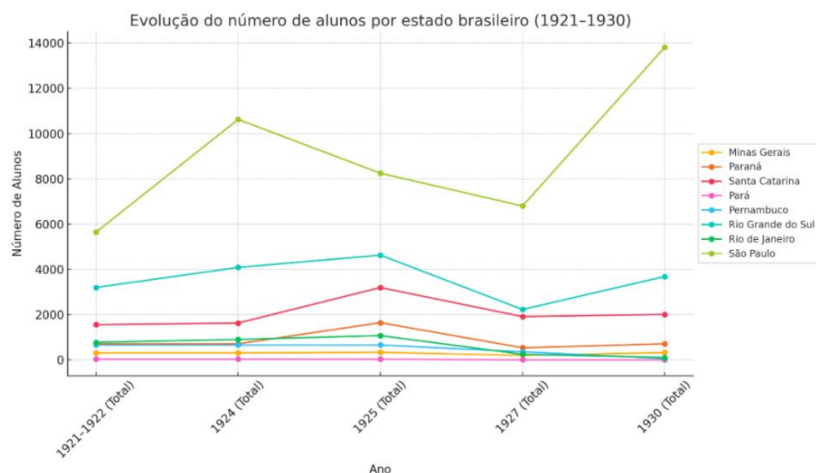
Table 2 - Number of students enrolled in Italian schools by Brazilian state and by gender (1921–1930).

State	1921– 1922	1921– 1922	1924	1924	1925	1925	1927	1927	1930	1930
	Male	Fem.	Male.	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.
Minas Gerais	206	101	206	101	288	45	189	09	226	95
Paraná	293	411	293	415	681	963	254	279	275	433
Santa Catarina	990	565	1052	575	1888	1307	1269	642	1313	697
Pará	15	15	15	15	15	15	-	-	-	-
Pernambuco	656	-	656	-	656	-	355	-	31	30
Rio Grande do Sul	1581	1618	2448	1637	2471	2157	797	1429	2179	1507
Rio de Janeiro	525	249	652	249	793	279	245	-	62	39
São Paulo	3887	1755	5667	4959	5727	2521	4448	2351	8474	5346

Source: Yearbooks of Italian Schools Abroad (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1921–1930).

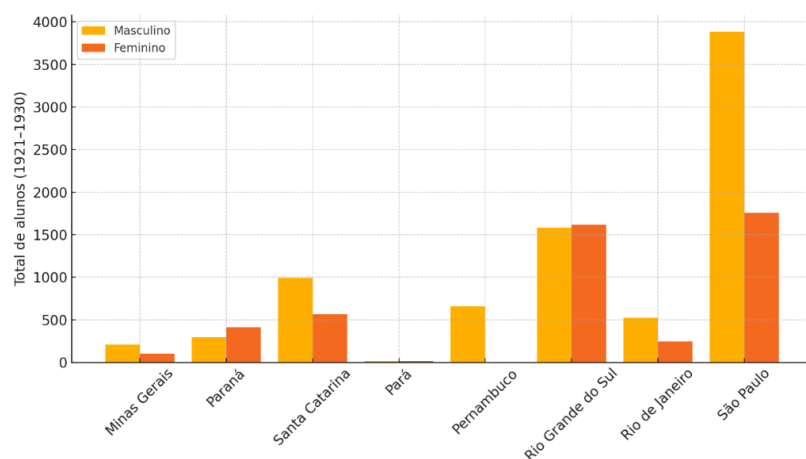
As shown in the above table, there is a significant concentration of institutions and registered enrollments in the Southern region, especially in the states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná, as well as in the state of São Paulo, which has the highest number of institutions and registered enrollments on its own. This distribution generally follows the main Italian migratory flows between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, reflecting the population density of the Italian colonies that formed in these territories. The data suggest that the consolidation of Italian schools depended not only on the numerical presence of immigrants but also on the ability of local communities to mobilize resources, associations, religious congregations, and consular ties to sustain these institutions over time. Furthermore, the existence of more economically structured communities may have facilitated the continued operation of schools with external support from the Italian government. While these schools received subsidies, materials, and didactic textbooks from the Italian government, they depended on well-established local structures for maintenance, including physical facilities, teaching staff, and support from associations. Supplementary resources were often mobilized by emigrant communities themselves (Castro, 2024).

Therefore, the national overview presented here does not aim to provide an exhaustive coverage of Italian schools in Brazil. Rather, it aims to serve as a basis for understanding how and where this presence was recorded and legitimized by institutions. It lays the groundwork for future research linking these data to other sources, such as association minutes, consular correspondence, accounts from former students, and parish archives, which can provide further insight into the educational practices developed by Italian communities in different parts of Brazil. The figures, organized by state, indicate trends of regional concentration, institutional continuity, and varied growth depending on the local context. Data disaggregated by sex adds dimension to the analysis. Some schools were predominantly male or female, reflecting the profile of their sponsoring organizations, such as religious congregations, civic societies, or technical-vocational institutions. Often, a balance between the sexes is evident, suggesting the existence of coeducational schools, especially in cities with a limited number of institutions. The following graph illustrates trends in total student enrollment by state from 1921 to 1930. The lines represent the combined totals of male and female students for each state.

Graph 2 – Trends in the number of students by Brazilian state (1921–1930).

Source: Chart created by the author based on data from the Yearbooks of Italian Schools Abroad (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 1921–1930).

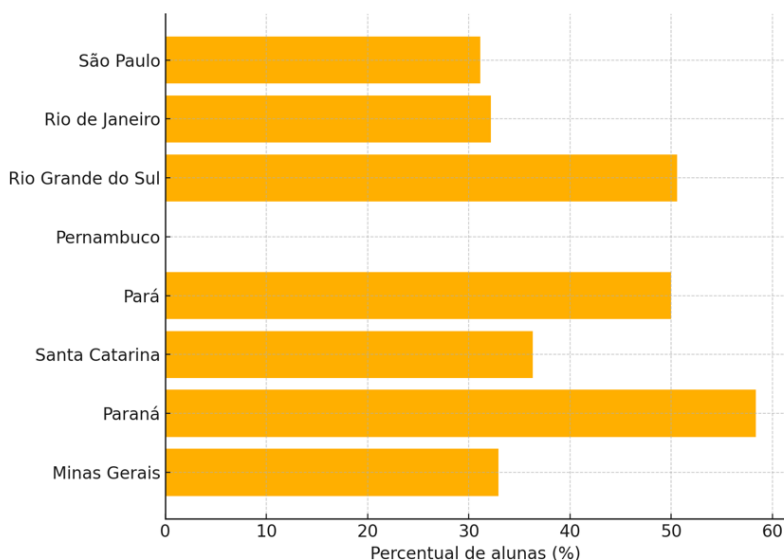
The graph illustrates São Paulo's dominance in terms of enrollment in Italian schools throughout the 1920s. There was significant growth, especially between 1927 and 1930, when enrollment peaked at over 13,000 students. Rio Grande do Sul had the second-highest number of students and showed relative stability between 1921 and 1930 despite a slight decline in 1927. Santa Catarina also shows consistent numbers, with significant growth through 1925 and a slight decline in subsequent years. Other states, such as Paraná, Minas Gerais, and Rio de Janeiro, have more modest numbers with significant variations, especially between 1924 and 1925. Pernambuco stands out due to a sharp decline at the end of the time series. Analyzing the graph reveals the concentration of the Italian school network in regions with higher immigrant density, as well as the effects of political, administrative, and consular reorganizations on the recognition and operation of these institutions over time.

Graph 3 - Total number of students by state and by gender.

Source: Chart created by the author based on data from the Yearbooks of Italian Schools Abroad (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 1921–1930).

Enrollment figures reveal that although boys were the majority in Italian schools throughout the 1920s, girls also had a significant and relatively constant presence. Male enrollment peaked in 1925 and declined sharply in 1927, mirroring a similar trend among female students. The symmetry of the curves suggests that, although there was a slight male predominance, girls had more balanced access to Italian schools in Brazil than one might initially assume, especially compared with other immigrant contexts of the same period. These figures challenge interpretations associating Italian-ethnic schooling with predominantly male student bodies. They indicate that in certain Brazilian regions, girls were also significantly incorporated into Italian communities' educational initiatives. The state of Rio Grande do Sul stands out in the graph, with an almost equal presence of boys and girls. However, examining the data for each school in the yearbooks reveals a strong presence of religious congregations with schools geared toward girls. These include the Institute of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians (Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice) of the Salesian Congregation (De Matos, 2013), as well as various Scalabini schools run by nuns. Other schools run by nuns also focused on educating female students, which certainly influenced the consistent number of female students in Italian ethnic schools. The institutional coordination of religious congregations originating from the Italian peninsula was fundamental to establishing this network of education and assistance in the Americas. As early as the late 19th century, congregations were founded specifically for emigrants. These congregations had the explicit purpose of preserving the faith, preventing the loss of national identity, and promoting the civic well-being of Italians in the Americas (SANI, 2021). The significant presence of these religious congregations indicates that girls' education played a crucial role in Italian communities' educational initiatives. In addition to providing formal education, these institutions fulfilled moral, religious, and cultural functions, contributing to the preservation of values considered essential for maintaining ethnic and Catholic identities among immigrants' descendants.

Graph 4 - Proportion of girls among students by state (1921–1930)



Source: Chart created by the author based on data from the Yearbooks of Italian Schools Abroad (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 1921–1930).

The observed regional differences suggest that girls' access to Italian schooling was influenced by the size of emigrant communities and the institutional profile of schools, particularly the role of women's religious congregations, in each state. In states such as Minas Gerais, Santa Catarina, and Pará, girls account for more than 50% of total enrollment. This may indicate a significant presence of girls' schools, which are generally linked to religious congregations, or an absence of gender-based segregation in local schools. Conversely, in states such as Espírito Santo, Bahia, and Pernambuco, the percentage of girls is considerably lower. This suggests contexts in which girls' access to formal education was more restricted due to cultural traditions, institutional structures, or the profile of schools officially recognized in the yearbooks. Disaggregating the data by sex revealed important qualitative elements of the schools' profiles. Although boys outnumber girls in most states, the number of girls is significant and, in certain cases, constitutes a majority. This phenomenon is deeply intertwined with the activities of religious congregations in various Brazilian states that focus on educating girls.

Furthermore, the graphs reveal that the Italian school presence in Brazil was neither homogeneous nor static. Temporal fluctuations, state-level variations, and differences in enrollment profiles point to a dynamic network shaped by political decisions, the availability of local resources, relations with Italian consulates, and transformations within immigrant communities. Rather than settling the matter, the data presented here pave the way for more in-depth questions about the day-to-day functioning of these schools, their curricula, their relationships with the Brazilian state, and the meanings attributed to schooling by those who participated in it.

4. The Case of the State of São Paulo

In Brazil, the state of São Paulo—then a province—received the largest number of Italian immigrants (Cenni, 2011). Other immigrant groups arrived in São Paulo as well. The significant Italian presence fostered the formation of a broad network of ethnic institutions focused on assistance, social interaction, and cultural preservation. According to researcher Franco Cenni's documentation of immigration statistics for São Paulo, between 1877 and 1914, 1,728,620 immigrants entered the state, 845,816 of whom were Italian (Cenni, 2011). Italian immigrants headed to both the state capital, São Paulo, and the state's interior to work on coffee plantations (Trento, 1988). Biondi (2010) writes that São Paulo was the metropolis with the largest population of Italian descent in the 20th century, with Italians constituting the majority in all sectors of the workforce. Cenni (2011) records travelers' accounts of São Paulo. One notes that the city is more Italian than Brazilian: "My ears and my eyes hold unforgettable scenes. On the streetcar, at the theater, on the street, and in church, people spoke Dante's language more than Camões's" (p. 327). Several researchers have studied Italian immigration to São Paulo, including Alvim (1986), Cenni (2011), Trento (1988, 2000, 2013, 2016), Scott and Bassanezi (2005), Bassanezi et al. (2008), and Truzzi (2016). The Italian population established associations that provided practical, day-to-day support, such as medical care, as well as ethnic and cultural institutions aimed at fostering community. These institutions included aid societies and mutual aid societies, which were analyzed by Luca (1990) and Biondi (2012). Some of these associations ran schools subsidized by the Italian government. These schools served as spaces for education, social interaction, and cultural dissemination. Thus, São Paulo occupies a central position in the history of Italian immigration to Brazil and, consequently, in the history of Italian schools abroad. According to data extracted from yearbooks, São Paulo has the highest number of registered Italian schools and students of any Brazilian state, with institutions in both the capital and various

cities throughout the interior. This data reflects the magnitude of the Italian presence in the state and the institutional and associative organization of these communities, many of which established schools, cultural associations, newspapers, and other means of preserving their identity. The concentration of these institutions in São Paulo reveals the Italian government's strategic interest in engaging with the largest Italian community in South America by using schools as a mechanism for linguistic, cultural, and symbolic preservation.

The city of São Paulo is home to Italian institutions in both the capital and inland cities. There was a mix of schools run by religious orders, charitable institutions, and secular organizations within the Italian community. In addition to the capital, cities such as Campinas, Jundiaí, Sorocaba, São Carlos, Ribeirão Preto, Araraquara, and Santos hosted institutions that the Italian government officially subsidized. These schools' presence in the interior is directly linked to the formation of colonial settlements and the development of urban centers with significant Italian immigrant populations, particularly in agriculture, commerce, and the nascent industrial sector. According to Truzzi (2016), most Italian immigrants in São Paulo moved to the state's interior to work on coffee plantations. Analysis of the data also reveals a diversity of institutional profiles.⁵ Religious congregations ran some, while others operated with the support of civic associations (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 1921–1922; 1924; 1925; 1927; 1930). In both cases, these institutions had a dual purpose: to educate children and to disseminate Italian culture and politics, especially during the Fascist period when the Italian government intensified its control over schools abroad. The coexistence of religious, associative, and secular schools demonstrates that "Italianness" in São Paulo's schools was not homogeneous, but shaped by different social and institutional actors who ascribed distinct meanings to the education of children of Italian descent.

The concentration of Italian schools in São Paulo reflects the magnitude of the Italian presence in the state, which has welcomed hundreds of thousands of immigrants since the late 19th century. Therefore, São Paulo is not only a quantitatively significant example but also a unique laboratory for studying the transnational dynamics of Italian education. Here, foreign policy, immigrant associations, school culture, and symbolic disputes over identity and belonging intersect. In the next section, we will delve deeper into this topic using data extracted directly from Italian yearbooks. Our focus will be on schools in São Paulo between 1921 and 1930.

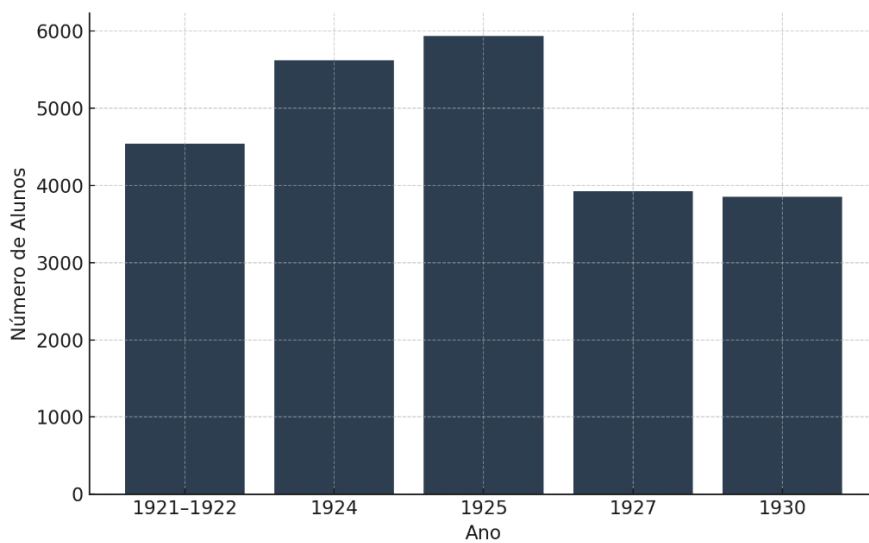
4.1. Detailed Analysis of the State of São Paulo

A detailed analysis of data extracted from Italian yearbooks pertaining to the state of São Paulo for the years 1921–1922, 1924, 1925, 1927, and 1930 provides insight into the quantitative scope of the Italian school network and some of the institutional and political transformations that shaped its operations in the state of São Paulo. The case of São Paulo highlights the formation of a complex transnational network of educational institutions linked to the migratory, associative, and political dynamics that shaped relations between Italy and Brazil in the early decades of the 20th century.

The graph below shows the variation in the number of students enrolled in officially recognized Italian schools in São Paulo between 1921 and 1930.

⁵ In this article, we were unable to analyze all aspects of Italian immigration to the interior of São Paulo. For a more comprehensive examination, we recommend reading Truzzi (2016) on Italian identity in São Paulo's interior.

Graph 5 - Trends in the number of students enrolled in Italian schools in Brazil between 1921 and 1930.



Source: Chart created by the author based on data from the Yearbooks of Italian Schools Abroad (*Ministero degli Affari Esteri*, 1921–1930).

Between 1921 and 1925, enrollment increased significantly, from 4,540 to 5,939 students. Beginning in 1927, however, there was a sharp decline in enrollment, a trend that continued until 1930. This fluctuation may be related to changes in the criteria for recognizing schools in yearbooks, the reorganization of local educational institutions, or political and diplomatic factors during the Fascist period, such as the state's increased control over Italian educational institutions abroad. However, the downward trend at the end of the decade does not diminish São Paulo's central role as the main hub of Italian education in Brazil. Another factor that may have influenced the decline in enrollment relates to educational nationalization policies, which limited the operations of foreign educational institutions. In São Paulo, for instance, the December 29, 1896, law already required foreign schools to teach Portuguese, as well as Brazilian geography and history. The 1907 Education Yearbook of the State of São Paulo emphasizes that "under these conditions, such schools will be truly pernicious in their effects because they turn native Brazilians into a future generation of Italians" (São Paulo, 1907, p. 43). In line with state legislation, Law No. 1,579 of 1917 mandated the teaching of Portuguese, Brazilian geography, and Brazilian history. It is worth noting that as early as the late 19th century, São Paulo authorities were concerned with nationalizing immigrant populations and the potential impact of foreign ethnic schools on Brazilian national identity. In analyzing the closure of Japanese schools in São Paulo, Omuro (2015) writes that the federal legislation that resulted in their closure was preceded by nationalist legislation enacted by the São Paulo state government. Fluctuations observed throughout the decade demonstrate that the expansion of Italian schools was not linear, but rather marked by political, administrative, and national tensions that directly affected the institutional recognition and funding mechanisms of these schools.

The following graph compares the number of students enrolled in Italian schools in the capital and in the interior of São Paulo throughout the 1920s. It highlights the central role of São Paulo in this process while revealing a significant growth trend in Italian schools in the state's interior.

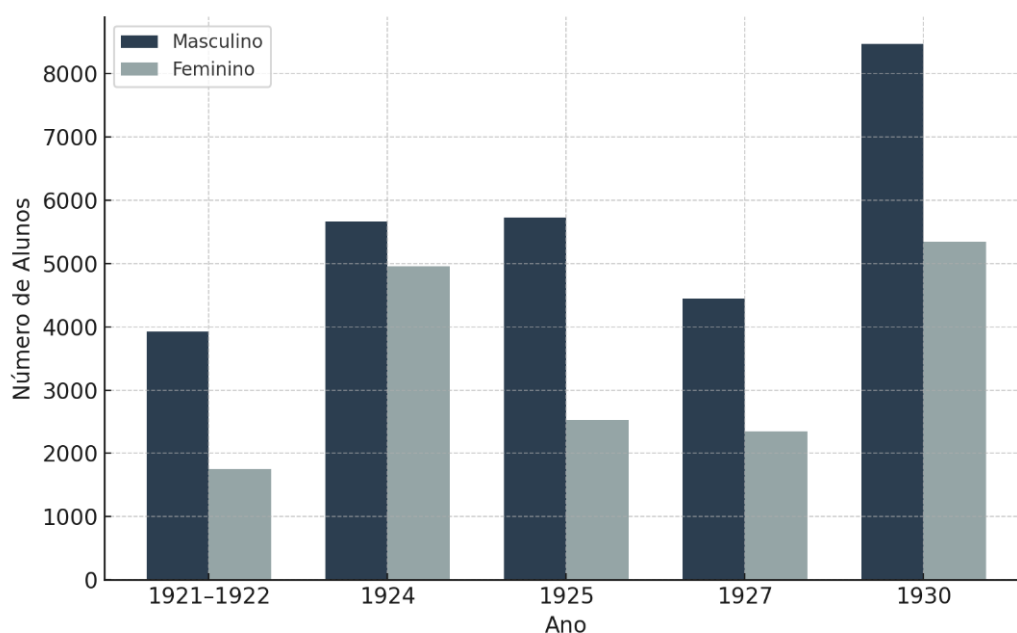
Graph 6 - Comparison of the number of students in Italian schools between the capital and the interior of the state of São Paulo (1921–1930).



Source: Chart created by the author based on data from the Yearbooks of Italian Schools Abroad (*Ministero degli Affari Esteri*, 1921–1930).

The bar chart clearly shows the distribution of students enrolled in Italian schools in São Paulo, the state capital, and in cities throughout the state. Throughout the analyzed years, the capital remained the main hub of the Italian school system, with significantly higher enrollment figures. This can be attributed to the higher population density of Italian communities in São Paulo, as well as to the presence of community, religious, and consular institutions that directly supported these schools. The capital also had more favorable structural conditions, including school buildings, stable teaching staff, and an urban location with wide circulation of ideas and resources. However, the graph also reveals a consistent and growing presence in the state's interior throughout the period. In 1921–1922, the number of students enrolled in the interior was modest, at 1,083, but it nearly tripled by 1930 to 2,638. This significant surge in rural and interior enrollment corroborates the demographic trends identified by specialized historiography through empirical data. Authors such as Angelo Trento (1988) and Oswaldo Truzzi (2016) have noted that the largest group of Italians in the state of São Paulo migrated to the interior. Initially, they were drawn by work on coffee plantations, and later by the development of emerging urban centers. Consequently, schools were needed for these workers' children.

This trajectory indicates the "internalization" of Italian educational policy, which is associated with the growth and stabilization of Italian settlements in São Paulo municipalities, including Ribeirão Preto, Jundiaí, and São Carlos. The growth of schools in these areas reflects the maturation of these communities' organization and the efforts of Italian state representatives to extend their cultural and symbolic influence beyond the capital.

Graph 7 – Number of students in the state of São Paulo by year and by gender

Source: Chart created by the author based on data from the Yearbooks of Italian Schools Abroad (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 1921–1930).

The graph illustrates changes in the enrollment of male and female students in Italian schools in the state of São Paulo throughout the 1920s. Throughout the years analyzed, there was a significant predominance of male students, which may reflect a preference for educating boys among Italian immigrant families. This preference aligns with the cultural expectations of the time regarding work and the training of future heads of household. Nevertheless, the consistent enrollment of girls in Italian schools suggests that female education was also important to immigrant communities, particularly in institutions affiliated with religious congregations. The number of girls remains constant throughout the years and, at certain times—such as in 1924—nearly equals the number of boys. This suggests that these communities also valued girls' access to education, particularly in urban settings or those with a strong religious presence. Fluctuations in total numbers by sex over the decade can be attributed to variations in the official recognition of schools in the yearbooks and to changes in family dynamics, consular policies, and educational priorities imposed by the Italian Fascist regime. Throughout the years analyzed in the yearbooks of Italian schools abroad, religious congregations consistently operated schools focused on girls' education (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1921–1922, 1924, 1925, 1927, 1930). These schools generally focused on moral and domestic education and played an important role in preserving the Italian language, culture, and Catholic faith among young women of Italian descent. These congregations' activities demonstrate how Italian educational projects abroad were linked to the dissemination of religious, moral, and cultural values considered fundamental to preserving Italian identity among younger generations.

Table 3 - Number of Italian schools in the state of São Paulo (1921–1930)

Year	1921-1922	1924	1925	1927	1930
Number of schools	60	87	93	55	56

Source: Yearbooks of Italian Schools Abroad (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1921–1930).

The table shows that the network of Italian schools in the state of São Paulo significantly expanded between 1921 and 1925. During this period, the number of institutions increased from 60 to 93, indicating an intense effort to consolidate and expand the Italian school system. This effort may have been linked to the strengthening of the fascist regime's educational policy abroad and the growth of immigrant communities in São Paulo's interior. However, a significant decline began in 1927, with the number of schools falling by nearly half in just two years (from 93 to 55). The number of schools remained stable in 1930. This decline may be related to various factors, such as the reorganization of Italian consular policy, changes in criteria for official school recognition, or the effects of Brazilian policies on national education, which restricted foreign institutions' operations. Nevertheless, the number of schools recorded at the end of the decade indicates that the Italian school network in São Paulo remained structurally active and relevant in the educational landscape of immigrant communities. The network demonstrated significant institutional adaptability, remaining active despite growing nationalist pressures and the political transformations that marked the period.

Final considerations

This article provides a quantitative overview of Italian government-subsidized schools in South American countries, Brazilian states, and the state of São Paulo specifically, between 1921 and 1930. To this end, yearbooks of Italian schools abroad produced by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs were used as sources.

Systematizing and analyzing the data in these yearbooks, which serve to establish and organize the Italian presence abroad, provided an overview of the distribution of these institutions by state. This highlights areas of greater concentration as well as gaps in coverage. This provides a better understanding of the landscape of Italian schools and paves the way for future in-depth studies analyzing the inner workings of these institutions, which are part of each receiving country's educational history. The analysis revealed a link between the presence of Italian schools and the population density of Italian communities, as well as the organization of immigrant communities through associations, urban infrastructure, and Italian consular and diplomatic activities.

A closer look at the state of São Paulo revealed the wide variety of school models implemented, ranging from religious institutions to civic associations. These models operated in both the capital and cities in the interior. These data allow us to formulate relevant hypotheses about the operation of Italian educational policy abroad, the circulation of pedagogical models, and strategies for maintaining identity in immigrant communities. São Paulo's central role indicates that the Italian school was mobilized as both an educational space and an instrument of cultural mediation, linguistic preservation, and strengthening social networks within emigrant communities.

Rather than concluding an investigation, this study aims to pave the way for new research integrating the presented quantitative data with complementary qualitative and documentary approaches. It is therefore hoped that subsequent studies will contribute to an understanding of the structure of these institutions and the individuals who brought these experiences to life, including professors, students, and families involved in these school settings. Future research could delve deeper into specific cases, examine curricula and didactic

materials, reconstruct the career paths of teachers and administrators, and understand the place these institutions occupy in the collective memory of Italian communities in Brazil and other South American countries.

Understanding yearbooks as historically produced sources linked to the Italian state's strategies for engaging with emigrant communities reinforces the importance of methodological approaches combining quantitative analysis, critical source interpretation, and historical contextualization. The proposed analysis is therefore a starting point for a broader reconstruction of the Italian educational presence in Brazil and South America. This presence was political, cultural, emotional, and educational.

Methodologically, this study reaffirms the importance of incorporating statistical data and official sources as central elements of historical educational research, provided they are linked to critical, contextual, and interpretive analyses. Rather than offering definitive answers, the use of numbers raises new questions, reveals gaps in the record, and allows for the reconstruction of social processes with greater precision and depth. In this sense, numbers appear as documentary constructs that aid in understanding educational phenomena.

As a next step, we propose exploring case studies of specific schools in more depth, cross-referencing them with other sources, such as consular reports, professors' letters, and school regulations, and extending the time series to include data from after the 1930s. Furthermore, comparisons with other South American countries can help construct a transnational history of education among Italian diasporas, highlighting convergences, singularities, and transformations throughout the 20th century.

The data analyzed here highlight regional concentrations, institutional fluctuations, and local differences in the organization of Italian schools. This broadens our understanding of the relationships between immigration, education, and cultural policy in the early decades of the 20th century.

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