

Youth and Adult Literacy in Bahia: between policies, programs and their absences¹

*Alfabetização de Jovens e Adultos na Bahia:
Entre políticas, programas e suas ausências*

*Alfabetización de Jóvenes y Adultos en Bahía:
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Abstract: The article aims to analyze the literacy programs for young people and adults developed in the State of Bahia from 1996 to 2014, inferring how the unfolding of their executions continues to impact the literacy policies adopted by the State today. The study was structured on the aegis of the qualitative approach, supported by bibliographical research of an exploratory and descriptive nature, using dissertations, articles and official documents of the government of the State of Bahia as sources for data production. The results indicate that the analyzed programs collaborated to reduce illiteracy in the State and that women were the largest public enrolled in them. However, even in the face of the significant contribution to the reduction of illiteracy, the programs did not become effective as a public policy for adult literacy, and their extinction refracts to the maintenance of a persistent picture of illiterate young subjects and adults in the State.

Keywords: Youth and Adult Literacy; Educational Politics; Educational Programs.

Resumo: O artigo tem como objetivo analisar os programas de alfabetização de jovens e adultos desenvolvidos no estado da Bahia no período de 1996 a 2014, para isso, analisa os impactos e desdobramentos de suas execuções nas políticas de alfabetização adotadas pelo estado na atualidade. O estudo estruturou-se sobre a égide da abordagem qualitativa, alicerçada pela pesquisa bibliográfica de natureza exploratória e descritiva, cujas fontes para produção de dados foram dissertações, artigos e documentos oficiais do governo do estado da Bahia. Os resultados apontam que os programas analisados colaboraram para reduzir o analfabetismo no estado e que as mulheres foram o maior público matriculado. Entretanto, mesmo diante da significativa contribuição para redução do analfabetismo, os programas não se efetivaram como política pública de alfabetização de adultos, posto que a sua extinção resulta na manutenção de um quadro persistente de sujeitos jovens e adultos analfabetos no estado.

Palavras-chave: Alfabetização de jovens e adultos; Política educacional; Programas educativos.

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Resumen: El artículo tiene como objetivo analizar los programas de alfabetización para jóvenes y adultos desarrollados en el estado de Bahía de 1996 a 2014, infiriendo cómo el desarrollo de sus ejecuciones continúa impactando las políticas de alfabetización adoptadas por el estado hoy. El estudio se estructuró en el marco del enfoque cualitativo, apoyado en una investigación bibliográfica de carácter exploratorio y descriptivo, utilizando disertaciones, artículos y documentos oficiales del gobierno del estado de Bahía como fuentes para la producción de datos. Los resultados indican que los programas analizados colaboraron para reducir el analfabetismo en el estado y que las mujeres fueron el mayor público inscrito en ellos. Sin embargo, incluso frente a la importante contribución a la reducción del analfabetismo, los programas no se tornaron efectivos como política pública de alfabetización de adultos, y su extinción refracta al mantenimiento de un cuadro persistente de jóvenes y adultos analfabetos en el estado.

Palabras clave: Alfabetización de jóvenes y adultos; Política educativa; Programas educativos.

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Introduction

Bahia is one of the nine states that make up Brazil's Northeast Region and, like the other states in this territory, has a history marked by educational exclusion of the popular classes, especially the large number of young people and adults who were not guaranteed the right to schooling. The consequences of this reality are reflected in statistics that reveal the absence of public policies aimed at the educational modality that serves the Youth and Adult Education (EJA) population. According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), “in 2019, half of the adult population in Bahia had not completed elementary school [...]” (IBGE, 2020).

Regarding the illiteracy rate among the population of Bahia, data published by the IBGE in the 2010 Census highlight that, among all Brazilian states, Bahia had the highest number of illiterate individuals. At the time of the census, there were 1,729,297 people aged over 15 in Bahia who had not acquired basic reading and writing skills. This figure represented 16.6% of the state's population, exceeding the national illiteracy rate at the time, which was 9.6%. It is important to note that illiteracy in Bahia is also marked by race and age. According to the 2010 IBGE survey, the highest proportion of illiterate people was among those aged over 60, totaling 44%, followed by adults aged 40 to 59 at 22.1%, those aged 25 to 39 at 10%, and young people aged 15 to 24 at 3.7%.

It is evident that Bahia has a highly diverse population. In this sense, when the IBGE (2010) uses race/ethnicity as a criterion for analysis, educational inequality becomes even more apparent. Low literacy rates are concentrated among the Black population (17.8%),

followed by mixed-race (pardo) individuals (17.1%) and Indigenous people (18.9%). In this indicator, the age group over 60 also remains prominent. It is clear that the majority of illiterate individuals are among the Black and mixed-race populations, which can be explained by various social factors — notably the fact that Bahia has the largest number of Black and mixed-race people compared to the white population in the country.

Popular young adults are not occasional accidents who, for no reason, abandoned school. These young people and adults carry long histories of denied rights — histories that are collective. The same histories experienced by their parents and grandparents; by their race, gender, ethnicity, and social class⁴ (Arroyo, 2005, p. 30).

A decade after the release of the 2010 Census data, Bahia still faces a serious illiteracy problem. In July 2020, the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNADC) conducted by IBGE revealed that, in 2019, more than 1.5 million people in Bahia aged 15 or older were unable to read or write a simple note. This alarming figure represents 13% of the state's population, highlighting concerns as these rates were higher than those recorded in 2018 and 2016. This situation underscores the persistence and worsening of the illiteracy challenge in Bahia.

The figures related to age and race remain analogous to those presented in the 2010 Census, as the highest number of illiterate individuals continues to be concentrated among older people and those who identify as Black, mixed-race (pardo), and poor. Notably, among individuals aged 40 and over, the data indicate that 89% are illiterate, and among those aged over 60, this number reaches 54.8%.

The research also highlights the staggering educational inequality affecting adults, the elderly, Black, and poor populations in Bahia, where “the illiteracy rate among those who identify as Black or mixed-race (13.5%) is higher than among those who identify as white (10.4%)” (Instituto [...], 2019, n.p.). This scenario of denial of the right to education for Black and mixed-race adults in Bahia is a remnant of the historical construction of Brazilian education, which has been shaped by structural racism. In this regard, Almeida and Alves (2011, p. 87) argue that:

Revisiting the history of Brazilian education — which cannot be separated from the history of Brazil itself — it becomes clear that elementary school, chosen by the popular classes as an important space for accessing citizenship, was consolidated amid negative social representations regarding the presence of Black people.

⁴ This quote, as well as all others in this document, was translated from Portuguese. The original versions can be found in the references at the end of the text.

It is important to highlight a positive aspect regarding the literacy landscape in the state: “[...] the illiteracy rate among women aged 15 and over, in 2022, was 5.4%, while for men it was 5.9%. Among the elderly, the rate for women was 16.3%, slightly higher than that of men (15.7%)” (IBGE, 2022, online). This reflects the resilience of women who have historically reinvented themselves to occupy spaces and claim their rights.

The negative outcomes related to the literacy of Black youth and adults in the state of Bahia are a direct reflection of the lack of projects and public policies that respect the specificities of this educational modality and foster an emancipatory pedagogical practice. Such a practice should be capable of providing learners with politically engaged learning opportunities while also nurturing the desire for lifelong learning. As Paiva (1983, p. 23) emphasizes, “literacy and basic adult education should always begin with an examination of the learners’ existential reality, identifying the roots of their problems and the possibilities for overcoming them.”

In the field of adult literacy, Bahia fails to comply with Article 205 of the 1988 Federal Constitution, as it does not guarantee education as a right for all, nor does it fulfill the duty of the State to invest effectively in the educational processes of working-class youth and adults, as well as of different ethnic groups who experience daily discrimination of all kinds.

Bahia is one of the states in the Northeast region marked by deep contradictions. On one hand, it boasts significant natural wealth and gains international recognition for its tourism industry; on the other, it faces severe social hardships that result in the denial of basic human rights. By neglecting the fundamental needs of its population, the state perpetuates a scenario of inequality and social exclusion, which further deepens the gap of illiteracy, unemployment, hunger, school dropouts, and contributes to the overall stagnation and regression of education — especially for young people and adults. These are merely some of the consequences of the absence of public policies and the lack of commitment from the state’s leadership.

Based on these reflections and the data presented, this article analyzes the public literacy policies for youth and adults implemented in the state of Bahia between 1996 and 2014, focusing particularly on the Adult Literacy Program (AJA Bahia) and the All for Literacy⁵ (TOPA) program. This analysis also requires an understanding of the consequences stemming from the absence of such policies for Youth and Adult Education (EJA).

The research is structured under the qualitative approach, which “works with the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values, and attitudes” (Minayo, 2010, p.

⁵ The name of the program in portuguese is Todos pela Alfabetização, which justifies the acronym “TOPA” that will be used during all this text.

21). It is also based on what Marconi and Lakatos (2010, p. 166) define regarding exploratory bibliographic research: “bibliographic research, or secondary sources, encompasses all publicly available bibliography related to the subject of study [...]”. To that end, sources such as dissertations, articles, government documents from the State of Bahia, and reports from the Bahia State Department of Education were consulted.

Overview of the recent development of Adult Literacy Programs in Bahia

The Youth and Adult Literacy Program: AJA BAHIA

The context of youth and adult literacy in Bahia closely mirrors the broader Brazilian reality, which is marked by exclusion, the discontinuity of assistance-based programs, and the lack of consistent educational policies directed at Youth and Adult Education (EJA). As such, the aim of these accelerated and disciplinary literacy programs was merely to improve the state's position in national statistics—essentially simulating a possible solution to the issue of illiteracy, which has long been perceived as a national shame. In this scenario, what becomes evident is the urgent need for an educational approach in Bahia that offers EJA students access to a reflective, emancipatory, and politicized form of education—one that enables them to learn in order to navigate autonomously within a literate society.

In this context, the state of Bahia has historically developed its literacy programs and policies in alignment with federal initiatives. However, in 1996, the State Department of Education of Bahia (SEC-BA) launched the Programa de Alfabetização de Jovens e Adultos (AJA BAHIA) at the state level. The program's objective was to ensure that both urban and rural youth and adults had access to the process of acquiring reading and writing skills. Beyond promoting the right to literacy, the program also aimed to foster critical reflection on the learners' own culture and surrounding diversity, seeking to reduce the conditions of inequality in which they lived.

It is about reducing inequalities by expanding access to resources — especially cultural ones — which leads us to the duty of seeking a positive correlation between socioeconomic development and the peaceful resolution of conflicts at all levels, in the pursuit of fostering citizenship awareness and restoring the dignity of the human person (Rehem, 1995, p. 4).

According to data from the State Department of Education of Bahia (SEC-BA), the program benefited 497,784 people in Bahia between 1996 and 2002. AJA BAHIA was structured under a collaborative framework, established through partnerships with various

social institutions such as universities, companies from different sectors, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), as well as with the support of civil society. The underlying idea was that these entities, working together, could contribute to reducing illiteracy in the state. As Faria (2008, p. 100) points out,

An important factor in defining the principles of the Program was to ensure and establish partnerships between different sectors of society and the public authorities, particularly with grassroots community-based groups, given their crucial role in mobilizing both non-literate individuals and literacy instructors, as well as in channeling and utilizing the resources available within the community itself.

Implemented in 1996 with state resources and supported by public state universities and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), AJA BAHIA served a significant portion of the population in Bahia. However, in 2003, the program joined the Programa Brasil Alfabetizado (PBA), a federally-driven literacy policy. This move was highly significant for strengthening and expanding AJA BAHIA, as the partnership between the state government and the Ministry of Education (MEC) contributed to promoting and increasing the number of literate individuals, as well as expanding services to thousands of non-literate people in Bahia. In this way, it achieved its goal of reducing illiteracy in the state, with a notable presence of women in the program due to how it was organized, thus offering them greater opportunities for inclusion in the literacy process. As Rehem (1995, p. 2) emphasizes,

This Program is based on the premise that illiteracy is preventable in a society; that government and society can and must be inseparable partners in the fight to overcome illiteracy as a strategy capable of contributing to the broader effort to eradicate poverty; and that literacy initiatives must be aligned with the state's development policies and social change strategies in order to be sustainable.

After partnering with the Ministry of Education (MEC), the AJA BAHIA/Brasil Alfabetizado Program, in 2004, achieved significant results in the adult literacy process in Bahia, following the establishment of partnerships with state universities, with whom agreements were made regarding the training of literacy instructors. As Silva (2016, p. 74) highlights,

The literacy instructors were selected based on the following criteria: (a) being a student in the 2nd or 3rd year of Teacher Training programs (high school level) or undergraduate Teaching Degree programs (higher education level); (b) belonging to the local community in areas where there are no Teacher Training Schools; and (c) being willing to participate in the development of the program's pedagogical project and in the training activities.

According to Silva (2016), the precariousness of the role of literacy instructors within the AJA BAHIA program was evident: they received approximately one minimum wage, and their continued participation was directly tied to the performance of their classes. This reality reflects significant devaluation, expressed both in the low amount of the stipend and in the criteria for selecting and retaining these professionals. Linking job continuity to performance metrics further deepened this precariousness. The insufficient compensation was already a critical issue on its own, but connecting it to student outcomes ignored the complexity of the youth and adult literacy process, which involves social, emotional, and cognitive factors beyond the exclusive control of the instructor. This created undue pressure that compromised the learning environment and, ultimately, the quality of education.

Silva (2016) also notes that the selection criteria for literacy instructors were limited to educational attainment and willingness to teach. While this approach aimed to broaden access to the position, it disregarded a fundamental aspect: prior professional experience in adult literacy. Even though the program offered training, the lack of formal recognition of prior experience meant that valuable knowledge and well-established pedagogical practices were often underutilized or even ignored.

The AJA BAHIA program was implemented with the primary goal of promoting the acquisition of reading and writing skills among illiterate youth and adults. In its conception, the All for Literacy (TOPA) program was designed to go beyond basic literacy, incorporating respect for local diversity and culture, as well as aiming to combat poverty and socioeconomic exclusion. As a result, it expanded access to education for youth through literacy. For the state of Bahia, AJA BAHIA had significant meaning for a certain period, as it managed to reach a considerable number of illiterate individuals. For some time, this effort led to a significant reduction in the number of illiterate people in the state, demonstrating the program's ability to reach its target audience and produce positive impacts.

However, the implementation of AJA BAHIA raises a fundamental question about the concept of Youth and Adult Education (EJA) that underpinned the program. Although the program facilitated access to reading and writing and recognized the importance of cultural diversity and the fight against exclusion, its primary focus on literacy can be seen as a reductionist view of EJA.

It is essential to recognize that EJA goes far beyond the acquisition of basic literacy skills. It is configured as a process of comprehensive education that encompasses and values diverse fields of knowledge — such as history, geography, science, and mathematics — while also fostering the development of critical thinking, citizenship, and social and professional

inclusion. By focusing predominantly on literacy, even with social and cultural intentions, AJA BAHIA may have failed to fully explore the transformative potential of EJA, which aims for the complete emancipation and the construction of critical autonomy for learners.

Unfortunately, like other significant educational initiatives that were discontinued in Bahia, the AJA BAHIA program was terminated. This discontinuation occurred before all of its initial objectives were fully achieved, representing a setback for youth and adult education in the state.

In Bahia, policies directed toward youth and adult literacy in recent decades have been implemented in a hurried, discontinuous, and disconnected manner from the realities of the EJA modality and its learners. AJA BAHIA was one of these programs that, despite having significantly contributed for a time to reducing illiteracy in the state and improving Bahia's position in national literacy statistics, ultimately did not transform the reality of exclusion experienced by most illiterate individuals. The program was interrupted and replaced by a new initiative that, although sharing similar literacy goals, revealed a significant gap in its conception of Youth and Adult Education (EJA). Unlike a more critical perspective, the new program did not appear to understand EJA as a field of knowledge that goes beyond the mere learning of reading and writing codes. Contrary to common assumptions, EJA must be understood as a deeply political, social, and emancipatory process. As Matos Oliveira (2007, p. 251) emphasizes, this gap is highly significant; therefore, he points out that

[...] the three main problems of youth and adult education in Bahia: (1) the inadequate training of professionals in youth and adult education; (2) the low salaries paid; and (3) the precarious quality of life of all individuals involved, as a result of the population's socioeconomic conditions.

It is important to emphasize that, in the same decade in which the AJA BAHIA program was discontinued, the state of Bahia launched another project: All for Literacy (TOPA). This initiative represented yet another attempt to combat illiteracy in the region, aiming to expand educational access for youth and adults who had either interrupted their schooling or had never attended school.

The Special Program for Youth and Adult Literacy: All for Literacy (TOPA)

The termination of the AJA BAHIA Program did not put an end to Bahia's efforts to continue the literacy process for youth and adults in the state. With this purpose, the All for

Literacy (TOPA) program was created, with the goal of addressing and continuing the process of reducing illiteracy. Thus, through Decree No. 10.339, dated May 9, 2007, the state government of Bahia established the Special Program for Youth and Adult Literacy – All for Literacy (TOPA), whose objectives were to:

I – reduce illiteracy rates in the state of Bahia; II – promote quality education by ensuring the enrollment and retention in school of youth aged 15 and older, as well as adults; III – provide beneficiaries with conditions that effectively support their social, political, economic, and cultural inclusion; IV – offer youth and adults professional training opportunities integrated with the literacy and schooling processes (Bahia, 2007, n.p.).

With the same expectations as the previous program, TOPA, aimed at the literacy of adults, was yet another initiative by the Government of Bahia to overcome illiteracy, which, as in other states of the Northeast Region, was—and still is—high. According to Silva (2016, p. 75), this second program “even continued the practice of establishing a program rather than a permanent public policy, lacking an emergency character.” According to the description on the website of the State Department of Education of Bahia (SEC), the goal was to provide quality education within the state of Bahia for adults, that is,

To promote quality education for the population of youth, adults, and the elderly, ensuring their enrollment and retention in school, guaranteeing them the necessary opportunities to acquire reading and writing skills, and creating the objective conditions for their social, political, economic, and cultural inclusion (Bahia, 2007, online).

The data released by the state government at the time of TOPA’s implementation affirmed that the program was structured as a policy developed through partnerships with “municipal governments, social and labor movement organizations, and public and private universities.” Among TOPA’s key actions, according to the State Department of Education, were the implementation of:

[...] studies and research, ongoing professional development for literacy teachers, the development of tools and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation, the production of teaching and pedagogical materials, among other actions that ensure its effectiveness. Facing the challenge of eradicating illiteracy in Bahia through youth and adult education policies (aligned with the principles of the State’s Political-Educational Project), TOPA pursues the goal of teaching one million people aged 15 and over to read and write (Bahia, 2008, n.p.).

TOPA brought, in its structure and implementation, some differences compared to AJA BAHIA. While the previous program was implemented at the state level with its own funding — and only later received federal funding — TOPA was established from the outset through a partnership with the Programa Brasil Alfabetizado (PBA), which provided resources for the development of the program. As Silva (2016, p. 76) states,

[...] it is the Programa Brasil Alfabetizado (PBA) that funds the costs of training for literacy instructors and class coordinators, school supplies, food items (school meals), transportation for instructors, pedagogical materials, eye exams for learners, as well as stipends for both literacy instructors and class coordinators, among other expenses.

Although funded through Programa Brasil Alfabetizado (PBA), TOPA differed from it in several aspects. While TOPA required 60 hours of initial training for literacy instructors, the PBA offered only 40 hours. Additionally, the textbooks used in TOPA were specifically designed for the program, reflecting the identity and unique characteristics of the state of Bahia.

The implementation of the TOPA program in several prison facilities in Bahia, which involved selecting and training inmates to act as “social educators,” reveals an interesting—albeit complex—intersection between education and incarceration. The involvement of state universities in training these individuals, a crucial step, raises important reflections about both the potential and the challenges of this approach. Although the term “social educators” provides a new framing for the role of literacy instructors, it is essential to analyze to what extent this redefinition impacts both the perception and the effectiveness of educational activities within these institutions.

While this initiative may appear positive at first glance, it raises serious questions about the concept of Youth and Adult Education (EJA) that underpinned it. The notion that an accelerated training process, even if well-intentioned, would be sufficient to prepare individuals to serve as educators in such a complex context as the prison environment—and for such a specific audience as that of EJA—reveals a misunderstanding of what this educational modality truly demands.

Working with youth and adults, especially those deprived of liberty, goes far beyond merely teaching reading and writing. EJA requires a deep understanding of the social, emotional, and cognitive realities of learners, as well as a strong pedagogical and critical foundation. The training of educators for EJA must go beyond the basics, preparing individuals to engage with the multiple dimensions of the educational process and to foster autonomy and citizenship. The training provided in this context may have been insufficient

to equip these social educators with the necessary tools to face the inherent challenges of EJA and, consequently, to ensure the quality of education and the genuine social transformation that this modality seeks to achieve.

The TOPA Program [...] is characterized by its extensive reach and the diversity of groups and communities it has served since its inception in 2007. Its simultaneous presence across territories with such distinct characteristics and varying demands posed significant challenges to the program's design and implementation teams, requiring versatility to adapt the work to the realities of each group or community served, while always respecting the principles, values, and objectives outlined by the Program (Bahia, 2012, p. 87).

According to data from SEC-Bahia, at the time of TOPA's implementation in prison facilities, more than 100 incarcerated individuals who were illiterate had the opportunity to learn how to read and write. Furthermore, they were able to continue their educational process through elementary and high school education within the prison itself. The program's primary objective was not only to promote literacy but also to foster social inclusion, as the incarcerated social educators received a stipend of R\$ 400.00, which was allocated to their families. In addition, the learners were entitled to sentence reduction based on their participation in the classes. As Silva (2016, p. 77) emphasizes, "The Department's motto is to respect the right to citizenship, to learning, and to ensure quality education." In this sense, the individual's condition or circumstance was not a barrier.

Women and men are shaped in and through work, in and through the word. To deny the right to work or to the word is to deny the right to life itself. The All for Literacy (TOPA) Program, committed to the lives of Bahian workers, recognizes work and the word as inseparable and indispensable rights for human existence (Alves & Gadotti, 2014, p. 26).

TOPA mobilized various sectors of Bahian society in favor of adult literacy, with the aim of improving social indicators and including individuals who had historically been denied the right to education and were in the process of social inclusion. The program served youth aged 15 and older, adults, and elderly individuals who were illiterate. It also benefited basic education teachers without formal teaching qualifications, popular educators, social educators, coordinators, sign language interpreters (LIBRAS), among other participants involved in the program's implementation.

The training of professionals involved in the TOPA program—including educators, teachers, sign language interpreters, and coordinators—was the responsibility of both public and private universities and institutes. This partnership not

only facilitated the training itself but also led to the development of studies, research, teaching materials, program monitoring, and evaluation. In addition to these initiatives, the program also developed *Pedagogical Dialogues*, which were moments of pedagogical planning with the participation of labor unions and social movements. According to Silva (2016, p. 78), their purpose was “to engage in dialogue with class coordinators regarding the pedagogical support to be provided to literacy instructors.” In the same vein, Freire (2013, p. 109) reinforces that

[...] dialogue is an existential necessity. And if it is the encounter in which the reflection and action of its subjects are solidarily directed toward the world to be transformed and humanized, it cannot be reduced to an act of depositing ideas from one subject into another, nor can it become a mere exchange of ideas to be consumed by the interlocutors..

According to data presented on the website of the Bahia State Department of Education (SEC-BA), in its effort to improve social indicators in the state, TOPA brought together “public managers, businesspeople, social and labor movements, community leaders, students, and volunteers.” This collective effort in favor of adult literacy is reflected in the statistics that represent a significant shift in the Bahian landscape, especially regarding the reduction in illiteracy rates. Structured to mobilize, engage, and share the collective commitment to adult literacy, TOPA developed not only *Pedagogical Dialogues* but also the *Open Listening* initiative, which sought to involve organizations and civil society in support of youth and adult literacy.

SEC-BA (2008) highlights that “[...] it was an open listening space, for discussion and for sharing the program’s conceptual guidelines, in order to ensure the qualitative implementation of the TOPA Program.” This listening process took place through meetings with municipal managers, who had the opportunity to report the program’s progress and setbacks, present structural and operational data, share the actions implemented in the municipality, and highlight advances in improving literacy indicators.

Youth and adult literacy in Bahia, much like the national context, has historically been characterized by accelerated programs, assistance-based campaigns, and initiatives driven by voluntarism. Despite the participation of higher education institutions, which were formally responsible for educator training and material development, this collaboration did not guarantee the necessary depth in the qualification of participants. The focus was placed on superficial “training” rather than on robust pedagogical education.

This approach revealed a critical gap in both the conception of Youth and Adult Education (EJA) and in the preparation of educators, as it underestimated the inherent

complexity of this educational modality. Consequently, although the Bahia State Department of Education (SEC-BA) reported significant numbers of individuals who became literate, it is clear that the program was unable to overcome the deep educational inequalities that persist in the state, as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1 — Student profile and the results achieved by TOPA (2007–2014)

Programa All for Literacy in the state of Bahia	
Female students — young women, adults, and elderly women	55%
Male students — young men, adults, and elderly men	45%
Rural area students served by TOPA	66%
Students served by TOPA from urban areas	34%
Youth, adults, and elderly individuals literate through TOPA	1,1 milhão
Municipalities served by TOPA	407
Participating organizations, companies, social movements, and labor unions	588

Source: organized by the author based on data from SEC-BA (2021).

Table 1 highlights the data presented on the website of the Bahia State Department of Education regarding the implementation of TOPA from 2007 to 2014. It is evident from this data that women continue to represent the majority of those seeking education through TOPA, accounting for 55% of the total number of students.

It is also clear that rural areas still exhibit significant rates of illiteracy, although the program reached numerous municipalities across Bahia, serving 1.1 million illiterate individuals, which demonstrates that the desired reduction was achieved. Despite these positive outcomes, there remains a pressing need for the commitment of all three levels of government in Brazil to literacy, which must be recognized as a non-negotiable right for working-class adults who have historically been denied access to education and the conditions necessary for continued learning.

Another important aspect to highlight about this initiative in Bahia is that the documentation for All for Literacy (TOPA) reflected an intention to align with the National Curriculum Guidelines for Youth and Adult Education (DCNs/EJA) established in Brazil, particularly those from the year 2000 (CNE/CEB Opinion No. 11/2000 and CNE/CEB Resolution No. 1/2000). There was, therefore, a clear intention for the program to be consistent with these regulatory frameworks, which advocate for an EJA focused on valuing the learner and promoting critical thinking.

However, the implementation of TOPA faced significant challenges. For instance, the accelerated training of educators, the lack of continuity of the program as a permanent state policy, and its excessive dependence on federal counterpart funding often compromised its full

execution. These issues reveal a clear gap between the program's intention to align with EJA guidelines and the weaknesses in its implementation. This scenario strongly illustrates how the absence of a consistent praxis can undermine the transformative potential of an initiative, even when it is well-intentioned in its theoretical foundations.

Throughout the seven years it was active, the All for Literacy (TOPA) program operated in alignment with national literacy policies for youth and adults, such as the Programa Brasil Alfabetizado (PBA). Its primary objective was to reduce the number of illiterate people in Bahia and, consequently, to overcome the exclusion of youth, adults, and the elderly from educational environments. Although this pursuit of inclusion is commendable, the program's almost exclusive emphasis on reducing illiteracy numbers may have sidelined critical discussions about the quality and depth of the educational process—an essential element for the true emancipation of individuals. Regarding diversity, the program was guided by certain principles aimed at addressing the rich diversity present within the state:

From the collective construction of knowledge and the appreciation of participants' experiences throughout the entire educational process. From respect for the socioeconomic, political, and cultural diversity of those involved. From respect for the specificities of each locality—the knowledge, values, traditions, experiences, potentialities, challenges, and diversity of the participants. From the inseparability of theory and practice during educational and training activities. From formative actions that promote the autonomy of individuals, taking into account the specificities of youth, adults, and the elderly, considering their different life trajectories, expectations, and experiences. From the strengthening of cultural identities throughout the educational process (Bahia, 2014, p. 3).

We believe that it is impossible to overcome educational exclusion and discrimination in the state of Bahia—or anywhere else in the world—without a strong commitment to democratizing access to and ensuring the retention of youth and adults in quality schools, while also addressing the specific demands of Youth and Adult Education (EJA). Like its predecessor, TOPA was a discontinued program, which was terminated in 2014, leaving Bahia with no public policy directed toward adult literacy. This created a gap that has deepened the divide of social exclusion among the people of Bahia, further separating the working class from those who hold economic power, as the former continue to be denied the right to even basic schooling.

Conclusions

Youth and adult literacy is a legally guaranteed right for all Brazilians who, due to various social and political factors, did not have the material conditions necessary to attend school during childhood, adolescence, youth, or adulthood. However, in some states in Brazil, social inequality is more severe than in others, given the lack of governmental commitment and responsibility to guarantee the population's access to basic education, which results in significant illiteracy rates.

The states of the Northeast Region suffer from a historically entrenched process of social exclusion, which is reflected in the current high illiteracy rates. Among these northeastern states, Bahia stands out for its extraordinary cultural, human, and material and immaterial heritage. Yet, to this day, the state faces alarming illiteracy rates among the adult population, especially older Black and mixed-race (*pardo*) individuals. This reality leads us to recognize that illiteracy in Bahia has color, social class, and age, as research shows that the number of Black and Indigenous people without schooling is higher than that of white people.

Between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, the government of Bahia, through the State Department of Education (SEC-BA), sought to develop adult literacy programs aimed at contributing to the reduction or eradication of the state's high illiteracy rates. Among these programs, *AJA BAHIA* and *TOPA* are particularly noteworthy. Data presented by SEC-BA demonstrated that these programs contributed significantly to improving Bahia's literacy indicators on the national level.

Despite their contributions, the programs exhibited significant gaps in their conceptualization of Youth and Adult Education (EJA). By adopting an approach limited to teaching basic reading and writing, they completely overlooked the foundations of popular education. This approach failed to value learners' prior knowledge, their active participation, and their cultural backgrounds — elements that are crucial for meaningful and transformative learning.

Beyond these conceptual limitations, other factors undermined the effectiveness of the programs: the inadequate training of educators, the absence of higher education qualifications, the professional devaluation of instructors, and the lack of genuine, deep alignment with the principles of Youth and Adult Education. These combined factors undermined the programs' potential to truly overcome educational inequalities.

We argue that youth and adult literacy must be aligned with the principles of anti-racist, anti-sexist, and inclusive education to adequately serve all learners. Only then will it be possible to dismantle the existing reality of inequalities in the Northeast and other regions

neglected by public authorities, who sporadically implement programs and projects that are often disconnected from the realities of learners or designed merely to meet national targets.

In analyzing the *AJA BAHIA* and *TOPA* programs, it is clear that they brought significant contributions to the state, even though they did not manage to reach the entire population in need of literacy. Therefore, it is imperative to democratize and develop permanent literacy policies in the state — not merely temporary government programs aimed at mitigating the gap in educational inequality among the poorest sectors of the Bahian population.

In recent years, the state of Bahia has not developed any program or project directed toward the literacy of adults. This fact confirms the dismantling and marginalization of Youth and Adult Education (EJA) policies at national, state, and local levels. Following the termination of *TOPA*, Bahia has not produced any policy in this field of knowledge, further reinforcing the ongoing denial of the right to basic education for the Bahian population.

This gap in Bahia reflects a broader context of dismantling and marginalizing EJA policies across national, state, and local levels. Since the end of *TOPA* (*Todos Pela Alfabetização*), Bahia has failed to establish any new public policy for this field. This inaction has directly resulted in the continued denial of the right to basic education for a significant portion of the Bahian population, further deepening the conditions of exclusion and vulnerability for many citizens.

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