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Between acceptance and resistance: challenges faced by an untrained public elementary school teacher in the school and the city — Ituiutaba, MG, 1893–1925

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Abstract: This study examines the life trajectory of teacher Alzira Vilela (1893 to 1925), who taught in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. She became a public elementary school teacher at the age of seventeen, without having completed formal teacher training. Raised with a degree of freedom within her family, she was able to envision a teaching career from an early age, one that materialized through her qualifications and intense dedication. In this regard, the study focuses on Alzira Vilela's educational background and professional practice, as well as her role as a protagonist in her own educational journey. The research aimed to position this teacher within the broader history of primary school educators in Brazil, to outline her life path, to characterize her actions, reactions, and outcomes within public and private spheres of social engagement, and to map her material contributions to school education. The study is grounded in documentary research, drawing on sources such as handwritten texts, newspaper clippings, etc. The adopted methodology is (auto)biographical, combined with principles of discourse analysis for examining historical sources. The findings show that Alzira Vilela's status as an unlicensed teacher did not hinder her work, either individually or collectively; she demonstrated the autonomy and relational skills necessary to at times act outside established norms. Moreover, the absence of formal training did not prevent her from developing a critical perspective on the educational practices of her time, practices she herself helped to shape.
Keywords: primary school; unlicensed teacher; biography; protagonism.

1 Introduction

In the history of education in Brazil, as written over the past twenty years, the Proclamation of the Republic stands out as one of the most significant milestones. It marked the moment when the lack of public schooling became an inescapable problem. A contingent of more than 80% of the population had to be literate in 1900 (Romanelli, 1983; Saviani, 2013; Cunha, 1980). However, two central shortcomings weakened the republican intentions: the lack of primary schools and the shortage of

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teachers; both longstanding issues that gained further weight when the Republic declared the State to be secular. Since until then, the Catholic Church had “taken care” of the school structure, cutting relations with the clergy was indisposed from its educational apparatus. From the perspective of training, the problem was twofold: primary schooling and teacher education (Saviani, 2013).

The solution to the lack of primary education was proposed in the form of the school group model, which emerged in São Paulo during the 1892 public education reform and gradually spread throughout the country, especially in the second half of the twentieth century (Saviani, 2013). It meant opening more places for enrollment; consequently, the increase in the number of enrolled required an increase in the teaching staff, which pointed to the problem of lack of teachers. To supply it, the government had no recourse, except a way of articulation — not Republican — with the church, since the latter belonged to most of the Normal schools, which collected monthly payments.

Thus, although public school teaching was open to the possibility of accommodating women as regular and paid professionals, the opening was partial. The notion of partial accessibility is tied to the material conditions required to attend the Normal School course, such as the limited number of schools and their location in remote areas. This posed challenges for young people from the countryside, particularly in the Triângulo Mineiro region and the municipality of Ituiutaba. The logic of the partial was also applied to the creation of school groups, whose functioning depended on a trained faculty. If none were available, the solution was either to limit student enrollment — a clearly a no republican stance — or to accept unlicensed teachers, with no formal teacher training, in classrooms that were meant to serve as models — a stance hardly republican. For example, in Ituiutaba, for instance, the school group was established as early as 1910, through the João Pinheiro reform (1906). Inaugurated in 1911 under the name Grupo Escolar de Vila Platina, it began its activities with a teaching staff composed of a head teacher and three female teachers — one of them, Alzira Alves Vilela, was unlicensed and only 17 years old at the time (Ribeiro; Silva, 2003).

Indeed, this line of reasoning, from republican educational aspirations to the hiring of a lay teacher, unfolds in this study as an attempt to contribute to a central

aspect of the history of education: teaching, its professionals, and their practices. To that end, the case of teacher Alzira Vilela was examined as an illustrative example for understanding the reality of school group teachers in small-town settings. Her individual attributes prompted a deeper exploration of her life, especially during the period from 1911 to 1925. The study was guided by the following hypothesis: to a large extent, Alzira Vilela became and affirmed herself as a teacher through her personal will, which led her to act with dedication, determination, and effort, as well as with boldness, creativity, involvement, and professional commitment — as if teaching were her life's calling. In other words, she did what she did and was who she was not only because there was a shortage of primary teachers in the interior of Minas Gerais; but also because she had unique skills and motivations that were manifested in her conviction to be a primary teacher.

Formulated in the reflections that accompanied the reading of the material that supported the research, this hypothesis supposed to deal with some themes: bases and conditions in which Alzira Vilela acted as a primary teacher; conditions in which she was officially recognized as fit for the position. It was important to know what she could have done to, in six or seven years, go from graduating from complete primary education to a girl prepared to teach in a school group, to impose herself as a professional and to assimilate pedagogical and didactic knowledge that she would learn in the Normal course that she did not do. Her training and life experiences before 1911 played a significant role in her nomination to the position.

This study focused on the training of Alzira Vilela. Her professional trajectory, and the material expression of her teaching and learning practices. As well as the profile she built as a teacher and as a woman who played a leading role in shaping her history in education, through an engaged teaching practice with social commitment. Such protagonism is expressed not only in the realization of her work, but also in her intention to document it, along with the paths of her training. The subject is discussed with the aim of situating Alzira Vilela within the context of the history of primary teaching in Brazil, in dialogue with other teachers of her time. Specifically, the aim is to outline her life trajectory, characterize her actions, reactions, and the outcomes of her performance in both public and private spheres, and to map her material production related to teaching and school activities.

The study was developed as a documentary investigation, including handwritten texts and newspaper clippings, within the field of contemporary historical research on Brazilian education. In other words, it had to "*start from traces to (re)construct the facts*", s Prost (2015, p. 67, emphasis added) states regarding the writing of history according to the guiding principles of its fundamental method: the historical one (Prost, 2015, p. 67). The intention to study teacher Alzira Vilela emerged from the traces she left behind — notes, letters, printed materials, photographs, manuscripts, typewritten documents, and forms — which offer the possibility of reconstructing events related to her life. It is a *corpus* of systematized documents that open up possibilities to study her as a person and teacher, that is, they open up to the historical-biographical study of the trajectory: "[…] set of events that underlie a person's life" (Born, 2001, p.41, our translation). This strand allows us to understand processes, movements, and actions; impasses and advances (political, administrative, social, and cultural); contradictions and convergences; permanences and continuities; reactions and consequences; subjects, objects, and practices; and others.

Such a credential led to the biographical method: placing the subject in the foreground in relation to educational practices and institutions, for example. Yet such a decision must be prepared to face the challenges posed by "a method full of pitfalls," especially for those who conceive of a person's life as "a model of rationality," of "a coherent personality," or of "actions undoubtedly" (Levi, 1989, p. 22, our translation).

Indeed, rather than producing a biography, the intention was to conduct research in which biographical data would serve to illuminate social and collective aspects — such as context, dialogue, and forms of engagement within the social group. What stood out, above all, were Alzira Vilela's relationships with society: she is both the starting point and the central reference for understanding the attitude and experience of resistance marked by protagonism. She was interested in her life in relation to / with society, the example of the school community, and the clashes in Brazilian education between its agents. Therefore, she is the starting point for understanding the context and for returning to her; not the other way around. It is more or less as reasoned Dosse (2009): the study of singularities should be linked to the social, that is, analyzed in terms of biographical productions to allow a broader view of this way of writing the history of education in Brazil. Thus, aspects of a certain

trajectory, and not a set of life, were interested. The biographical understanding that we present is concerned with contextualization, but without the intention of exhausting the life course of the studied character (Bourdieu, 2006).

The underlying documentary research was based on a book organized[1] and systematized with facsimile reproductions of notes, letters, printed materials, and photographs, as well as manuscripts — including compositions, dictations, exercises, diaries, lesson plans, and others — typewritten documents, forms, and additional materials. The work constitutes a printed archive of a collection of authored and non-authored materials left by teacher Alzira. The collection includes everything from personal letters to correspondence exchanged with public education authorities, as well as records from the former Grupo Escolar João Pinheiro, newspaper clippings, and photographs. The book has the particular merit of organizing and presenting the material, largely handwritten, according to a thematic logic divided into sections: “Correspondence,” “Diaries and Lesson Plans,” “Compositions,” “Dictations,” and “Classroom Exercises,” among others.

From this material, therefore, the historical sources of the study, whose analytical reading was guided by two categories. Given the intention to outline a *profile of teacher* Alzira, it seemed coherent to work with the fields of *training* and *professional practice*. The first encompasses both *formal schooling* and *self-taught aspects*; the second refers to practices both *external* and *internal* to the school group. They were designed in the analysis of sources based on the methodological contribution of discourse analysis; that is, the historical-critical reading considered the sources as specimens of discourses that, as such, not only constitute the objective and subjective dimensions, but also contribute to social practice, as they compose and reflect it (Maingueneau, 1997; Orlandi, 2001; Charaudeau, 2006; Fairclough, 2008). In this case, it is about the objective and subjective social production, the practice, and reflection of a teacher who is inscribed in this time frame: from 1892 — birth of the school group — to 1925 — death of Alzira Vilela (born in 1893). Despite its brevity, it

[1] The book that brings together facsimiles of notes, letters, printed materials, photographs, typewritten manuscripts, forms, and other documents related to the life trajectory of Alzira Alves Vilela was organized by Betânia de Oliveira Laterza Ribeiro. The work is the result of in-depth research into the life and work of this unlicensed teacher in the interior of Minas Gerais in the early twentieth century. For further details on the organization and content of the book, see Ribeiro and Silva, 2003.

was an existence with singularities and facts valuable to historical interests in the lives of teachers, that is, in the history of training and teaching practice in Brazil.

2 The Lives of Teachers: Biography as a Way of Understanding

From the mid-1990s onwards, teacher education generated a significant number of studies of academic-scientific orientation. It is worth highlighting the initiatives of the Portuguese scholar António Nóvoa, whose individual works, as well as those coauthored with international colleagues, have resonated in Brazil as a distinct line of study, especially due to the linguistic proximity. An excerpt from the book's preface reflects this diffusion by stating that the volume organized by Nóvoa and Finger is among "the most frequently cited in theses, dissertations, books, articles, and research projects by Brazilian scholars who, since the 1990s, have turned to (auto)biographical sources as both a research method and a training practice" ((Passeggi; Souza, 2014, p. 11, our translation).

Coauthored, the preface precedes a set of texts that function as both methodological guidance — addressing themes such as autonomy, socioepistemology, and methodological application — and as a reflection on related subjects, including the subject and processes, formation and self-formation, narrative, biography, and life. Aligned with the perspective of this work are two other collections organized by Nóvoa: *Vidas de Professores* (1992), which addresses life stories, memories and life cycles, professional development, teacher education, and career paths; and *Profissão Professor* (1991), which focuses on the history of the teaching profession and teaching practice as an object of reflection involving function and creativity.

Aside from the explicitly historical perspectives, the subjects of the three works are interconnected through the relationship between the teacher, professional practice, and (auto)(trans)formation as *in the present* — envisioning future teachers (and their trainers), as well as practicing and retired professionals. The historical references essentially point to the constitution of the teaching profession and the institutionalization of teacher education through the Normal School. Thus, professionals whose lives have already ended — whose stories, at least the kind of

history understood as the construction of each individual subject, ceased with their death — seem to fall outside the scope of this approach and its central focus of interest.

Thus, the methodological-theoretical framework presented by Nóvoa (1992) *et al.* appears to outline a method in which history is understood as an ongoing process constructed by and within each teacher — as they are alive and capable of formulating and narrating it themselves. Thus, while life histories can be told in the first person by educators who are still available for interviews, in the case of a teacher like Alzira Vilela, it is the researcher who tells her story.

If that is the case, then the application of the (auto)biographical method to reconstruct the lives of teachers who have already passed away depends on documents that contain traces of self-disclosure — the first person, self-writing, such as letters and diaries. In such textual-discursive genres, it can be said that the first person tends to emerge, but it does so in relation to itself — to the "I" as interlocutor — rather than to the other. In any case, these texts can be regarded as instances of authentically authorial expression, marked by a high degree of subjectivity — akin to a response to an objective question about one's life history as a teacher.

However, even with the existence of documents capable of historical-biographical reading based on what was said in the first person, it would not be the case of a non-selective application of the methodological postulates assumed in the (auto)biographical approach. In cases of incomplete documentation, selection becomes even more necessary — as is the case in the present study. Teacher Alzira left behind a collection of documents related to her daily life as both a teacher and a student. However, records relating to the period from 1910 to 1920 are scarce. Most of the documents with the richest content date from the period between 1921 and 1925.

In addition, the documentation allows for a clearer outline of the teacher's professional profile: school and administrative record keeping, class diaries, notes on problems, lesson preparation records, and, above all, material from her student life during the preparatory course, starting in 1921. These include writing activities across various genres, such as letters, official communications, descriptions, short narrative accounts based on everyday observations (often featuring characters), as well as personal letters to her mother and "two friends." Everything was said in the first person, but all by exercise of writing, of composition, as it was said at the time, including the

missives to the mother and the “friends”. There are also messages written for real-life communication, including receipts for expenses to be reimbursed, among others. As can be inferred, the teacher projects herself in various dimensions of her work, and it is in this projection that the (auto)biographical method fits. Its validity stands out in the postulates that assume the dialogue between present and past.

Indeed, the (auto)biographical method aligned with the study’s objectives insofar as it lends itself to the analysis of “[…] the processes of people *in the making* […]” and the “[…] processual nature of formation […]”; of self-formation — a central axis in the sociology of formation; of the sociocultural and political context in which a teacher’s life unfolds — as proposed by Finger and Nóvoa (1995, pp. 21–24, emphasis added, our translation). The method supported the chosen *corpus* of sources for developing the study: the “[…] secondary biographical materials” (Nóvoa, 1995, p. 40), that is, the previously mentioned sources. The materials to be used may be either primary biographical — autobiographical accounts provided in face-to-face interviews with a researcher working with predefined intentions — or secondary biographical — any document other than a primary narrative that contains biographical content about the subjects: “[…] correspondence, photographs, written narratives and testimonies, official documents, reports, newspaper clippings” (Nóvoa, 1996, p. 57, our translation).

What matters most is that the foundations for applying the method reveal what Huberman (1995, p. 37) calls the “professional life cycle of teachers,” within the perspective of the (auto)biographical method — that is, the classical measure of a *teaching career*, from which derive progressive stages according to the outcomes of each phase. Thus, there is the entry stage into the profession, in which factors such as “survival” and “discovery” play a significant role. On the one hand, it involves a confrontation with the realities of the profession and its practices, in which the challenges may lead to a feeling of “I’m just holding on”. On the other hand, the “discovery” factor refers to the enthusiasm of finally practicing teaching “in a position of responsibility (having one’s own classroom, students, and curriculum), and of feeling like a colleague within a defined professional body”. Indeed, in the case of Alzira Vilela, the notion of “discovery” seems to apply more closely, as she sought to project herself into the teaching profession even before assuming a position of responsibility. There was in her a genuine inclination toward teaching, driven much more by interest than

by professional necessity — even though she married at 17 and became a mother at 18 or 19.

Once successful, the entry into the teaching career becomes fluid and peaceful, the passage to the next phase as: that of career stabilization. A life commitment is established, that is, a "definitive" one, and responsibilities begin to take root in the conduct of daily life. To this, may be preceded or accompanied by "a feeling of growing pedagogical competence," in which the teacher evokes "confidence and 'comfort,' associated with greater decentering: people become less concerned with themselves and more focused on didactic goals" (Huberman, 1995, p. 38, our translation).

Indeed, Alzira Vilela's career is associated with the notion of a growing and sustained "pedagogical competence", as perceived by those who lived and worked alongside her. Likewise, it aligns with the notion of "professional trajectory" as described by Gonçalves (1995, p. 148), which results from three developmental processes: "individual growth"; the "acquisition of skills and refinement" for the teaching–learning process; and professional socialization (adaptation, interaction, and integration).

Indeed, it is Nóvoa (1996) who offers a retrospective lens when discussing the biographical perspective — that is, the relationships between teachers' past and present. In this case, the logic of history made it possible to trace the history of education and the teaching profession starting in the late eighteenth century, when the profession began to be subjected to vertical regulation — that is, when state-issued licenses or authorizations became required, granted after examinations and the fulfillment of certain conditions (qualifications, age, moral conduct, etc.).

As a result, a legal framework was established for the exercise of teaching, as it created conditions "[…] for the delimitation of the professional field of education and for assigning teachers the exclusive right to intervene in this area" (Nóvoa, 1996, p. 17, our translation). In other words, the notion of a license or authorization can be considered the point at which the "[…] process of professionalization of the teaching profession is established, as it facilitates the definition of a profile of technical competencies, which will serve as the basis for teacher recruitment and the outlining of a teaching career" (Nóvoa, 1999, p. 17, our translation). On the other hand, the State came to hold the power of "official legitimation of its activity", while teachers found

themselves amid the “consolidation of the status and image of teachers” and the “organization of stricter state control” (Nóvoa, 1996, p. 17, our translation).

As Nóvoa (1999) states in his study on teachers’ lives, the focus on the “education *versus* profession” dimension cannot disregard the presence and role of the educational institution. A more evident case is that of the “[…] experiences carried out in the context of teacher education” (Nóvoa, 1995, p. 22) and of the “[…] first years of professional practice” (Nóvoa, 1995, p. 22, our translation). Indeed, if the State wished to have a teaching body prepared to educate according to certain precepts, then it had to provide the kind of training it expected teachers — particularly women — to receive. Otherwise, it would set a precedent for teachers without formal teacher training to take over classes due to the shortage of professionals certified by normal schools or equivalent programs. In a Brazil lacking the educational infrastructure to accommodate the ambitions of the republican government, teaching carried out by lay instructors was likely considered the “lesser evil”; the greater concern was the mass of illiterate citizens awaiting public schools, available seats, and primary school teachers.

3 School Groups and the Rise of the Teaching Profession: Pillars of the Republic

Intending to achieve the position of advancement and development of countries such as Germany, France, England, Switzerland, Scandinavian countries and the United States of America, among others, the Republicans undertook to reorganize public education in ways that they could school to guarantee the order and progress of society as a premise of the new regime (Araújo; Ribeiro; Souza, 2012). Economy and education were bound together in a logic whereby the latter would support the former: without educational development, there could be no urban economic-industrial growth, since, supposedly, the countryside did not need schools, even though it was home to the majority of the population. Within this logic, the early years of the First Republic were marked by reforms to what would come to be known as public instruction: free and compulsory primary education throughout the country (Saviani, 2013).

Starting in 1890, the state of São Paulo translated republican aspirations into a reform of the Normal School. As Souza (1998, p. 16) said, the new regime demanded:

> […] of a new professional, that is, teachers with the mastery of new teaching methods. The construction of a teacher's knowledge and know-how was configured from the imposition of educational models by the state, by the fragmentation of pedagogical work (each teacher a class, each schedule a subject) and by the redistribution of power within the school.

Such a reform opened more the possibility of reforming elementary education, which led to the reformist proposal of 1892, when the school group project was launched: public primary school model. In line with modern trends in school pedagogy, such as the intuitive method, it was regarded as suitable for shaping patriotic, practical, and disciplined citizens — that is, aligned with the Republic's vision of a national society. Although the achievement was another story, ideally such a model would innovate in the theoretical and pedagogical bases of education and in school practices; partly because the school group was New, partly because it was created to express a Republican identity, marked by rites and symbols, among others.

Despite occasional shortcomings, the school group came to represent, in Faria Filho's view (2003), a minimum level of equal schooling for women and men: mixed-gender classes in primary education and classes in the Normal School, where women obtained the "credential" for a more public life through teaching in school groups and other models. The school group offered a model of administrative and pedagogical organization that did not exist. In fact, there has been a reinvention of the public school because everything has changed: the place and time; the function — now depending on the student (of the child); the methods and contents; teacher training, employment, Control and supervision, etc. (Saviani, 2013).

Within the school groups, internal divisions became necessary, especially within the profession itself: the old classroom would be opened to both male and female graduates of Normal Schools, but the new principal's office would not. The reform also introduced the position of *school principal*, which tended to be filled by a teacher from the school, *appointed* by the government. Another position created was that of *school inspector*, which also tended to be held by men (Saviani, 2013). The permanent teaching staff was expected to be sufficient to serve at least forty students, with the possibility of appointing assistant teachers at the discretion of the administration (Souza, 2008).

The transition from the old school model to a new one required attention to how pedagogical aspects could be prioritized and made visible. And despite its shortcomings, the school group offered viable configurations for public instruction in the country — especially for pedagogical and teaching activities — conceived in relation to architecture, modern furnishings, teaching materials, and the need for supervision (Souza, 1998). Thus, despite various efforts to expand public primary education, school groups would not spread in significant numbers during the 1950s and 1960s. It was left to private schools — most of them religious — to meet the demand of those who could afford the costs, as well as to negotiate with the State through the receipt of subsidies and compensations. This included accommodating students the government was, to some extent, expected to support (Vidal, 2005; Souza, 2005, 1998).

Thus, despite all that it introduced — reforms, the centrality of pedagogical renewal, the intuitive method — the school group would remain a "dead letter" without the teaching staff to put it into practice (Pereira, Felipe; França, 2012). The teaching staff was a *sine qua non* for the restructuring of education according to the desired pedagogical principles; therefore, systematically trained teachers were necessary. But the professional scenario for young women aspiring to teaching was not only a few training institutions, but also public schools where they could work.

Even with limitations on women's teaching work to the Normal School and primary education, the prospect of an expanding primary school population led many young women to enroll in Normal Schools to graduate and "[…] respond to an expected increase in school demand" (Louro, 2004, n.p., our translation). As a result, teaching became a viable form of employment for women. However, Normal Schools remained limited to a few regions. A similar line of reasoning applies to religious teacher-training institutions (colégios), including both boarding and day schools — that is, they too were concentrated in cities of greater economic importance. Moreover, paid courses were more numerous than public ones (Louro, 2004, n.p.). In this context, it is likely that there was fierce competition for spots in public Normal Schools. That is, structural exclusion was at play, since young women who met the minimum requirements were also few. One must not forget: the majority lived in rural areas and were illiterate.

Even so, according to Antônio (2014), teaching expanded as a labor market, highlighting the prominent role of women in occupying positions within this emerging field. For women, teaching presented itself as an appealing career, offering an opportunity to work beyond the domestic sphere while still allowing for the reconciliation of home and professional life. This connection between home and labor would become a central issue in the relationship between women and work outside the home — and equally central to Catholic morality, which perceived the risk of disrupting a social order that positioned women as key figures within the family and the domestic sphere.

From this perspective, a connection was established between Normal School, marriage, and motherhood as part of the logic underlying teacher education. The home was presented as a learning environment for domestic education, but in a way that was "[…] removed from the conflicts and disharmony of the outside world […]" and was "[…] clean and cared for" (Louro, 2004, n.p., our translation). It was an idealization shaped by political directives, such as the consolidation of a Catholic ideal of the (nuclear) family, and religious orientations, like the propagation of an image of family that served as the backdrop of domestic life transformed into school knowledge, a subject to be studied (Louro, 2004; Antônio, 2014).

Work and teaching, marriage and motherhood were conditions that exposed the "*fragility*" attributed to women, constructed by religious, medical, legal, and educational discourses, as well as by the perceived need for protection and guardianship. According to Louro (2004, n.p.), it was necessary to "[…] produce the female teacher amid apparent paradoxes, as she must be, at once, guided and guiding, professional and spiritual mother, disciplined and disciplinarian."

In the interplay between work, teaching, marriage, and motherhood, the Church viewed women as responsible for maintaining a harmonious family, in which privacy, protection, and maternal affection were central to the child's development and formation. Therefore, marriage and motherhood were considered "[…] *the true female career* […]", and anything that diverted women from this path was "[…] perceived as a deviation from the norm" (Louro, 2004, n.p., our emphasis, our translation). In line with this reasoning, José Alberto Gonçalves (1995, p. 162) suggests that the possibility of marriage and motherhood — "[…] which, in general, coincide with the beginning of a

teaching career" — may have effects on the female teacher as a professional, particularly between training and practice.

This point becomes particularly significant when considering, as Guacira Louro suggests, the growing presence of women in Normal School and primary classrooms; a trend that supported the thesis of the feminization of teaching in Brazil. Even though in states like São Paulo, there was stable access to Normal School in the 1910s and 1920s, the population growth would not necessarily imply an expansion of the state's teaching staff. On the contrary, there was a drop in enrollment numbers (more than five hundred) (Louro, 2004).

Surely, this was the case of Ituiutaba, in the interior of Minas Gerais, where there was a lack of teachers and teacher training courses; and where teaching in the school group was a profession predominantly carried out by women — especially by married women. In the case of teacher Alzira, the year of her marriage coincided with the creation of the school group in the city (1910–11).

Figure – Alzira Alves Vilela at 17 years old, Ituiutaba, MG, July 1910[2]

Source: information from Ituiutaba (2025a); photograph from Ribeiro and Silva (2003, p. 45) – photographer unidentified.

[2] Alzira Vilela married Manoel Tavares da Silva Júnior, known as the "son of the farmer and merchant" Manoel Tavares da Silva, who served as a city councilman during the time her father was "mayor" of Vila Platina. The couple had a son, Cesario Alves Tavares.

As stated in the work by Ribeiro and Silva (2003), Alzira Vilela was born in Cana Verde, MG, in June 1893. The family[3] moved to Ituiutaba at an uncertain date, but certainly before 1900. There, her father would become the first mayor (executive officer) of the municipality, indicating a certain degree of prominence in the local society — further suggested by the possibility that she may have studied at a private school (although it was not possible to trace her formal education). In July 1910, at the age of 17, Alzira Alves married and took on her husband's surname, Tavares.

The circumstances of the marriage were reported in 2002 by the wife of Alzira's son, Cesario, to Ribeiro and Silva (2003). According to Machado, [4]there may have been resistance from the family due to a certain trait of Manoel Tavares Júnior: harmful alcohol consumption; to which the age difference was added (the photograph shows a man who appears to be around 35–40 years old). The consequences included the judgment of a Catholic-conservative society, the lethargy caused by drunkenness, and damage to the liver and stomach. As Hilda reported, Alzira Vilela was allegedly warned by her family about the risk of becoming a widow at a young age. The appeals, however, proved to be without effect. Around 1912–13, the couple's only child was born.

It is safe to assume that Alzira Vilela stepped away from the school group to give birth and care for her newborn in the first months of life. But it is a documented fact that, by February 1914, she was already filling out school attendance logs, as shown in the reproductions included in the work by Ribeiro and Silva (2003). From this, it can be inferred that marriage and motherhood influenced Alzira Vilela's teaching career and practice only to the extent of necessity; she did not stray from her professional intentions, which formally began in 1911 at the school group.

Indeed, in 1908, the public primary school was established in Ituiutaba: the then Vila Platina School Group, officially inaugurated in 1910 and opened in 1911. In

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[3] Information from government sources of the municipality of Ituiutaba (2025a) describes Augusto Vilela as a native of "Perdões," in southern Minas Gerais, and born "on August 14, 1846." He is said to have married at the age of 20, to Carlota Maria, who was then 12 years old. After the marriage, the family moved to Campina Verde, where he opened a pharmacy. In the 1890s, they moved to Vila Platina (Ituiutaba). The couple " had 12 children."

[4] The accounts of Hilda Tavares Machado, wife of Alzira Vilela's son, were given during a visit to the couple in 2002. However, the conversation was not recorded; the only form of documentation consists of handwritten notes and the researchers' memory (in this case, that of Betânia Laterza Ribeiro).

addition to the principal, the teaching staff began with three female teachers, among them, Alzira Alves Vilela and two male teachers. In 1912, Francisco Antônio de Lorena took over the direction; in his place, another professor entered. Until 1915, in his absence, the position of principal was assumed by teacher Alzira (Ribeiro & Silva, 2003). From that year on, José Ignácio de Souza became the principal. He introduced teaching methods and imposed strict standards regarding discipline and learning (Ituiutaba, 2025b).

By moving between the classroom and the principal's office, Alzira Vilela projected herself as a competent and trustworthy professional teacher, despite being a lay teacher.[5] Given that this transit certainly occurred in 1912 and 1914, what can be inferred is that she showed unusual professional preparation and skills for a girl under 20 years of age. It is unlikely that she learned the procedures and mechanisms of teaching and school management in just three years, and this improbability leads to the assumption that she had already been teaching before joining the school group and was already standing out as a teacher. Ribeiro and Silva (2003) endorse this possibility based on reports from her former students. Alzira Vilela is said to have started teaching in around 1907-8, at first in her home, then in colleges.

If that is the case, then one can think with Pineau (2014, p. 91) and his idea of "self-formation throughout the course of life" of the teacher — that is, a "[…] force that makes the course of life more complex and creates a dialectical field of tensions […]" that resists simplification. In fact, this author refers to the prefix "auto-" as an element within the semantic field of reflection and awareness, which are more typical of adult life (such as that of an active and experienced teacher, for instance). Thus, self-formation is connected to self-reflection and self-awareness, which are less likely to be present in the *girl* and *adolescent* Alzira Vilela, as a student in Primary and Secondary Education.

However, if one considers Alzira Vilela's attitude toward teaching — being a teacher at the age of 15 — one can recognize a certain trace of self-formation in an informal, domestic, non-schooled teacher without years of experience. This is because

[5] A lay teacher is someone who teaches professionally without having a degree in education — that is, "[…] a person who works as a teacher without having completed the necessary training to obtain the credential corresponding to the level of education in which they teach […]"; especially at the elementary levels (Augusto, 2025, our translation).

she takes “into her own hands this power [of formation] — to become a subject” in order “to apply it to herself,” that is, “to become an object of formation for herself” (Pineau, 1995, p. 95, our translation). Moreover, she may have managed to “circumvent” an obstacle the author identifies in women’s self-formation as teachers: “the omnipresent male power,” which “saturates sociocultural and socioprofessional models,” including within the domestic sphere. In this sense, engaging in self-formation would be a *front* in the “struggle for emancipation” and the “construction of one’s own world,” of “personal spaces” for formative action (Pineau, 2014, p. 105, our translation).

4 Alzira Vilela: the intuitive teacher in moments of resistance

It is possible that this perspective on self-formation fits even more closely with the case of Alzira Vilela, if one considers her condition as a teacher who possessed a world of her own, the owner of a space for action. Her singularity was described by a former student as an “exponential figure in the educational history of our city,” thanks to “the fulfillment of her sublime mission as an educator.” One scene remained fixed in his memory.

> I see her examining me in arithmetic during the final exams: a subtraction. Once the operation was done, the sum of the remainder and the subtrahend was supposed to equal the minuend, but it didn’t. I looked at the examiner, who stared back at me with a smile, and I, somewhat embarrassed, kept erasing one number and writing another, until it finally worked. Dona Alzira jumped out of her chair and hugged me, laughing with joy. […] As a teacher, Dona Alzira was truly a forerunner of the pedagogical approach most widely used in teaching today, employing *methods aimed at making students friendly and dedicated to their studies*, with physical punishment being prohibited (Petraglia, 2003, p. 44, our emphasis, our translation).

The scene described reveals the tensions of the learning process, in which the student’s effort is pressured by the passing of time and the frustration of not being able to solve the exercise. The tension is revealed in the need to focus on the calculation while simultaneously attending to the teacher, to her reactions and gestures. It is possible to observe a certain primacy of the student, who is seen taking on the task of learning on their own, yet aware of a kind of reward for the effort, translated into the teacher’s recognition, expressed through the embrace. Not by chance, Alzira Vilela's

teaching attitude was seen as a measure of the application of a method aimed at the student: to their relationships and their application in learning.

The account of another student, however, points to a different profile.

> I cannot fail to mention “and I do so with respect and emotion” the name of my teacher, Alzira Alves Tavares, an eminent *educator: energetic and uncompromising*. At that time [1922–25], corporal punishment was still in use, though rarely applied. I don't forget the scolding and ear-picking I received for not learning the score to decrease. “That business of borrowing from the neighbor just wouldn’t stick in my head” (Ituiutaba, 2025b, *online*).

Indeed, the impression of a “strict” and “uncompromising” teacher seems to contrast with that of the previous former student, who saw in her “a face always cheerful, teaching with such affection and devotion, winning over the students” (Petraglia, 2003, p. 45, our translation). More than that, the quote reveals another side of student engagement in learning, one in which failure implied punishment, a practice hardly compatible with the idea of a teacher who made “the students friendly” and led them to be “dedicated to their studies” (Petraglia, 2003, p. 45, our translation). Moreover, the method does not seem to have facilitated the learning process, in which mathematical language was too metaphorical for the student to understand — such as the idea of borrowing and the neighbor.

At the same time, distinct impressions align when the teacher is seen in action outside the classroom.

> Dona Alzira, ever attentive, would take me *to her home at night*, *explain things to me patiently*, and with just a *few lessons I learned.* Because at her home, *I was treated with affection and friendship*, and I felt no fear of punishment. I remember her referring to me: “Odilon learned how to do subtraction,” and, laughing, she added: “Constant dripping wears away the stone” (Ituiutaba, 2025b, *online*, our emphasis).

The passage suggests that the teacher’s behavior was dual, depending on the context. At school, it was necessary to follow a certain protocol, a strict code of conduct, perhaps imposed by the principal who took over the school group in 1915 and was known for being strict and disciplinarian. As such, he evaluated the teaching staff based on their compliance with his directives. Thus, in the classroom, Alzira Vilela acted like most teachers; but when the learning environment was not institutional but her own — the domestic one — she acted as a teacher truly committed to student

learning. She applied the principle of focusing on the students' needs, acting with patience and persistence because she believed in each one's learning potential. At that moment, even the metaphorical language of teaching became clear to the student who struggled with learning. Therefore, when *the place of learning* was the teacher's home and the lesson took the form of individualized support, she acted in such a way that she was seen as "our second mother, welcoming us […] as an extension of the home" (Petraglia, 2003, p. 45, our translation).

This support offered to students in the *teacher's own space* — the classroom within her home — was strengthened by the force of the context. At certain moments, Alzira Vilela was faced with orders to shut down the school group and took action to prevent it, that is, to avoid harming the students. Public health issues were prominent in this regard. For example, between 1911 and 1912, a smallpox outbreak in the region reduced school attendance and led the state government to decree the suspension of the school group's activities for two years. Alongside the principal and another teacher, Alzira Alves opposed the decision and voiced the teaching staff's opinion in an attempt to persuade the government to reconsider (Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, p. 45).

By the end of the decade, her stance was even more bold: during the Spanish flu epidemic (1918–1919), she defied the guidelines of the Minas Gerais Department of Education and chose to continue teaching through alternative means, offering classes in her home, with reduced class sizes and sanitary precautions. Such a stance, documented by Ribeiro and Silva (2003), reflects her commitment to the continuity of learning even in times of crisis. Following orders from the federal government, the administration of Arthur Bernardes implemented sanitary measures in Minas Gerais, including the suspension of school classes (Ribeiro; Carvalho; Silva, 2025). However, Alzira Vilela decided not to interrupt her work and found a way to carry on, teaching in her home during the two-month quarantine. If the students could not attend the school group, then they would attend the classroom in her home (Ribeiro; Carvalho; Nunes; Silva, 2025). In this way, the learning process would not come to a complete halt.

To reduce crowding, she divided the class into two groups, to whom she would teach on alternating days, as stated in Ribeiro, Carvalho, and Silva (2025). At the time of attending classes, everyone wore a mask. This was done from mid-October to mid-December. The authors infer that Alzira Vilela likely relied on reading and writing

activities to avoid the constant use of speech, since everyone was wearing protective masks.

The decision to carry out such an action cannot be attributed solely to Alzira Alves, since receiving students in her home directly affected her domestic life. Involved the leadership of the school group, and implicated the image of the municipal education department regarding compliance with the guidelines issued by the state-level education authorities. Certainly, she had the consent of parents and other stakeholders, including the municipal administration (Ribeiro; Carvalho; Silva, 2025). Yet through this attitude, the teacher distinguished her teaching practice as that of an active professional, committed to her craft and capable of taking the lead in critical situations, fully aware of her role: to ensure that the learning process would not be compromised, even if doing so required boldness, patience, persistence, and the willingness to face possible consequences. She was around 25 years old at the time. That is, she already had nearly a decade of professional experience in the school group. Surely, she had already accumulated a repertoire of disciplinary, pedagogical, and didactic knowledge — as well as confidence and credibility — sufficient to take what could be considered a bold stance in defense of the continuity of classes, even amid pedagogical, material, temporal, and procedural limitations.

Once the school group's activities were resumed in 1919, the year was marked by changes, including the appointment of a new principal and the reorganization of the teaching staff. A context in which Professor Alzira remained in her position, as she was, up to that point, among the "qualified and competent," according to a correspondent of *O Jornal* in Vila Platina. Moreover, still in March, another event contributed to the changing landscape: the inauguration of the "Ituiutaban Propaedeutic Institute," as reported by the correspondent. A normal school–trained teacher would remain in charge, as the owner had taken over the position of principal of the school group. The institute offered primary and secondary education for both boys and girls.

Indeed, this institute appears in Alzira Vilela's writings as the place where she studied between 1921 and 1923, while simultaneously teaching at the school group. In addition, a newspaper correspondent recorded in 1925 that she had pursued there the "preparatory studies required for the pharmacy program and sat for the exams in

Alfenas [southern Minas Gerais], without ever compromising her teaching at the school group" (Correio da Manhã, 1925, p. 6). As a result, the period from 1921 to 1923 was recorded in many handwritten texts of various genres, whose reading reveals a kind of "writing of the self for the self," distinct from diary writing or autobiography. They are personal writing exercises she produced during the preparatory course. When not expressing impressions, abstractions, or reflections on various topics, they are accounts of everyday observations, lived experiences at the institute, and personal matters, among others. These writings take the form of narrative letters to her mother, letters requesting favors from friends, narrative compositions, descriptive and dialogical texts, as well as correspondence with state and federal authorities, including secretaries of education and the President of the Republic. With the exception of four or five texts that show signs of revision and correction — such as erasures, strike-throughs, and other edits — most are presented in a finished form, cleanly copied. Some include clearly stated recipients or interlocutors, others bear titles written in decorative lettering, and a few feature more elaborate headers addressed to specific individuals. That is, they were texts ready for circulation.

However, the fact that they were kept by her and preserved for posterity tells us at once that they were not written texts to be sent, delivered, or circulated. In a word, get off her guard. Previously, they were personal writings, even intimate, from a practice that could be described as self-formation, whose content revolved around the life of Alzira as a mother, daughter, teacher, and student; reflections of a studious and developing educator; school life situations linked to educational administration and politics, in short, the concerns of a teacher committed to both doing and thinking in the name of teaching. Most of the texts are dated and geographically situated, and they mention names and events that support the factual reliability of the narratives — especially those presented as personal accounts. In this sense, such writings hold the same status as diaries or autobiographical accounts, even though they were not intended as such; that is, they were writing exercises through which she chose to record what was happening in her life and in her thoughts.

A compelling example of such texts is found in two letters Alzira Vilela wrote to her mother. Dated 1921 and explicitly located in Ituiutaba, the letters suggest a recipient who appears to be living elsewhere, in another city. In fact, it was not possible

to trace the mother's life to determine whether she was still alive and living in the same city as her daughter, nor is there any evidence to the contrary. There are three letters: one without location or date, but with a heading written in decorative lettering that reads "[…] Pátria," followed by the word "Composição" in standard handwriting, and two letters with both location and date — Ituiutaba, September 22 and 29, 1923.

The first letter suggests the idea of a writing exercise, as indicated by the word "Composição" in the title and by the nature of the subjects it addresses. The "obedient daughter" offers her "wishes" for her mother's health and "for all my siblings" and says she is "doing well." She then gets straight to the point: her "studies […] especially in Portuguese (composition)"; she writes, "in my last composition — a letter to a friend — I received an excellent grade, which made me very happy." She later refers to her difficulties with arithmetic, "que, a princípio, julguei invencíveis" and that she was overcoming "graças aos exforços [sic] do nosso incansável professor" (Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, p. 50). In English: "which, at first, I thought were insurmountable," and "thanks to the efforts of our tireless teacher." The original word exforços is a misspelling of esforços (efforts), preserved here for fidelity to the manuscript (our translation).

In the letter dated September 22, Alzira Vilela writes that "Cesario and I are doing well" and informs her mother of an imminent situation: a teacher at the institute had threatened to bring a group from a lower class "to beat us" if her class continued to struggle with Portuguese and mathematics. For her, the shame would be even greater than for "the other girls because I'm no longer a child" (she was already 30 years old). The letter dated September 23, in addition to the initial greeting and a mention of her son, recounts the case of a man whom she "got to know at our principal's house" ((Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, pp. 53-54, our translation). A member of a prestigious family in Mariana and a cultured man (he knew "French and Latin"), he had run away from home to avoid military conscription and began wandering "from town to town" until arriving "in this city, where he is seen as a criminal" ((Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, pp. 53-54, emphasis in the original; our translation).

It seems clear that the letters to her mother served the same compositional purpose as the one addressed to her friend, as she mentioned; in other words, they were tied to her academic activities at the propaedeutic institute. But she was not lying when she told her mother she was writing to a friend as part of a composition exercise,

for which she was well evaluated. Strictly speaking, the letters are addressed to two fictitious friends: N and X, with four letters written to each. They are neither dated nor geographically located, except for one. They average 5 to 10 lines in length, meaning they are brief.

With “Friend N,” Alzira Vilela shares accounts of school life in Ituiutaba, such as the case of a classmate from the institute “who is serving in education by teaching at the school group” (Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, p. 56, our translation). The letter dated October 25, 1923, is particularly eloquent in sharing her experiences as a student at the institute, especially regarding “composition”: “I find this subject very difficult and have made little progress, even though our teacher has been giving us composition exercises almost daily in these last days of class, since we are on the eve of exams” (Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, p. 60, our translation).

With Friend X, Alzira Vilela shares congratulations, well-wishes, and requests for favors, as well as accounts of her travels. On September 22, 1921, she wrote a longer letter (over forty lines) describing the train trip to the city of São Paulo via the Mogiana railway — that is, passing through what was then São Pedro do Uberabinha, now Uberlândia — which she described as “one of the most beautiful in the Triângulo,” and “where education is quite advanced,” thanks to a school group, a secondary school, and private colleges. She complains about the trip, saying it was “very uncomfortable” because of the “scorching sun.” She left Ituiutaba at 7:30 a.m. and arrived in Uberlândia at nightfall. The next day, she took the train toward Ribeirão Preto, passing first through Uberaba, then continuing on to Campinas, Jundiaí, and São Paulo. Because it was by train, it was a “more pleasant trip” than traveling by car in the dust, even though she had to travel at night, change locomotives and lines, and so on. In São Paulo, she was dazzled by the Estação da Luz, “which is truly beautiful and so incredibly busy that it confuses a country girl like me” (Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, p. 57, our translation).

The trip certainly took place, perhaps even more than once, but the letter reveals a level of detail in the observations that does not seem to align with the time available. As in the case of Uberabinha, where she also highlights the local commerce and architecture. These impressions seem unlikely for a stay that lasted only overnight and part of the following morning. In other words, it is possible that the description of the

trip was based primarily on prior knowledge—perhaps from reading local newspapers, such as the one she mentions in her letter to N dated July 7, 1923: “While reading the ‘Tribuna de Uberabinha,’ I came across the news…” Likewise, it was in the newspaper *Minas Gerais* that she read the name of “Friend X” as having passed the final exam to obtain her teaching diploma (Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, p. 58, our translation).

However, judging by the number of texts Alzira Vilela composed, the information about the need to produce written material appears to be accurate—especially “simulations” of school documentation, such as correspondence between the school or the teacher and state authorities or agencies. The correspondence addressed to government and political authorities in Minas Gerais stands out both in volume — around twenty letters — and in content. In a letter to Afonso Pena, she referred to the schooling conditions in the municipality, namely, the lack of schools and asked him to “[…] create as many schools as possible […]” and authorize “[…] the construction of [their] buildings […]” (Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, p. 62). To Arthur Bernardes, in a letter dated September 25, 1921, she made a similar request: “[…] a proper building for the operation of the schools […]” (Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, p. 63). In a letter dated February 17, 1923, addressed to Fernando de Melo Viana, then Secretary of the Interior (Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, p. 65), Alzira Vilela described the institute where she was studying. Including the class hours from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m., which were compatible with her afternoon teaching shift at the school group. She also emphasized her focus on Portuguese language studies.

The dialogue with state authorities is perhaps the least likely to have taken place (she even simulates a response from Arthur Bernardes), largely due to the sociopolitical distance between the voice of a lay teacher from the countryside and the ears of the state governor. However, the truth of the content cannot be denied if one considers the points highlighted by Alzira Vilela: the shortage of public schools and the precarious conditions of those already in operation. In other words, although the correspondence was fictional, the subject it addressed was not. It was serious, it was sensitive to the republicans; a critical, weak, and central point for state governments. It is as if the teacher were fully aware of the debates surrounding the issue of primary schooling that *she was advocating for*. Therefore, from my experience, I knew that schools were created at a time to be installed years later; that is, I knew the gap

between creating a school and making it operate, after all, the school group where I taught was a living example of this educational policy. More than just teaching, she reflected on her own practice, the immediate and broader context, the conditions, and so on.

More than public education, Alzira Vilela showed herself attentive to the debate on two other sensitive issues of the Republic: the legacy of the monarchy and the relationship between Church and State. In texts she titled “Dialogue,” the teacher recounted a casual overhearing (“[…] I was coming from the school group […]” along “[…] Rua da Matriz […]”). She entered a corner shop where “two men […] were standing at the door […]”; while she was shopping, she overheard their conversation, in which they discussed “the advantages and disadvantages of monarchical and republican government.” One of them said he preferred the republican form because “citizens enjoy much more freedom than under the monarchy, which is a government of oppression” (Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, p. 52, our translation). The use of ideas such as freedom and oppression supports an undeniable point: if those were indeed the men’s words, then they were, to paraphrase Alzira Vilela, two sertanejos inclined toward reflection and political debate — just like her, who was able to engage in the purchase while attentively discerning the conversation of others. If, however, those were her words — a fabrication — then she was a sertaneja not only given to reflection and political debate, but also capable of translating them into fiction.

In another dialogue, she highlighted religion in the conversation between “a Catholic and a Spiritist” (Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, p. 52), that is, on themes such as salvation and reincarnation—topics echoed in another text, now a reflection with a metaphysical undertone: “the need for religion.” In this text, she begins by referring to Louis Pasteur and microbiology, stating that “it has been demonstrated that there is no spontaneous generation,” and goes on to mention data about the existence of humankind according to physics… Indeed, Alzira Vilela deepens her reasoning to support her conclusion: “Everyone should have a religion because to disbelieve in religion would be to disbelieve in the existence of God, and to disbelieve in existence would be an aberration […]” (Ribeiro; Silva, 2003, p. 89, our translation).

As we can infer, the relationships between the Republic, religion, and science permeated Alzira Vilela’s more in-depth reflection — on the existence of the human

being. She was familiar with debates that were current at the time, considering that Pasteur had gained prominence in the late 19th century—about thirty years before the teacher's reflection. She was well aware of the debates surrounding the fragile position of the Catholic Church in the Republic and of the elements that further weakened it: on one hand, scientific explanations for life; on the other, interpretations offered by other religions, such as Spiritism, which had a scientific undertone. Therefore, although she was a lay teacher, Alzira Vilela showed, on the other hand, that she strove not to be a *lay* person. It is as if, not having attended a Normal School, she applied herself to the utmost to make up for the demands of a profession that required formal teacher training. In doing so, she went beyond possible curricular boundaries, engaging with debates on the role of religion in a State that claimed to be secular. She also focused on the function of a secular State that aimed to become educated without the material and practical conditions to do so. Huberman's words speak eloquently.

> The desire to "maximize" performance in the classroom setting leads to a heightened awareness of the institutional factors that hinder this aspiration, prompting attempts to implement more meaningful reforms. Once stabilized, individuals can launch an attack on the system's aberrations (Huberman, 1995, p. 19, our translation).

The production of a "writing of the self for the self" by teacher Alzira continued until 1923, as she was surely approved in the entrance exams for the Pharmacy higher education program in Alfenas and began attending it. She was then 31 years old. However, the experience would last only a short time: on October 31, 1925, one month before completing the program and graduating, she drew her final breath "[…] in the early hours of the day […]" (Correio da Manhã, 1925, p. 6, our translation). Her death moved the entire town. In remembrance, a former student said: "We felt an emptiness that lasted for a long time throughout our lives!" (Ituiutaba, 2025, n.p., our translation). In a letter dated November 5, the municipal executive (mayor) informed her son, who was living in the south of the state.

> I give you the sad news of the passing of Dona Alzira Vilela… Her death was deeply felt, for you know how much she was loved by these people. The burial was extraordinarily well attended — unlike anything ever seen here. We suffered an irreparable loss. At the cemetery, the scene was heartbreaking — everyone was truly shocked, and the children from the school group were in tears, which was deeply moving… (Ituiutaba, 2025, n.p., our translation)

A newspaper correspondent, in reporting her death, described Alzira Vilela as "[…] endowed with a rare capacity for work and possessing a robust intelligence […]", calling her an "[…] indispensable and irreplaceable […]" figure in the school group.(Correio da Manhã, 1925, p. 6, our translation) More than that, he said her death had been "unexpected." However, accounts from her son's wife, previously mentioned, suggest a certain mysticism surrounding her sudden death. According to her, after her husband's death, the mother-in-law had a dream in which he told her he would come for her eleven years after his passing. In fact, in 1925 the eleven years were completed. On the other hand, the daughter-in-law's accounts suggested that a case of medication-related intoxication may have triggered her death.

5 Final Considerations

Certainly, Alzira Vilela's life was a brief one; yet surely, it was a life lived in the way she intended — one in which she was able to shape herself as a primary school teacher with a true sense of purpose, and in which she proved herself competent and capable enough to be exempt —paraphrasing Nóvoa — from the need for official authorization to be a teacher. In this sense, through her process of formation, professional action, and the materialization of her practice, she was a teacher who embraced a protagonistic role in her story, as an educator. Her case is illustrative of the reality experienced by primary school teachers in small-town Brazil during the First Republic. To a great extent, she was shaped and established within a logic in which the desire to become a teacher guided her life from early on, leading her to act with dedication, determination, and effort, as well as boldness, engagement, and commitment. She possessed unique aptitudes and motivations that were expressed in her conviction of being a primary school teacher and made of them the very substance with which she nourished her purpose.

Thus, between being accepted as a lay teacher and adopting a stance of resistance in her practice, Alzira Vilela not only overcame the challenge of working as a public primary school teacher without formal teacher training, but also faced broader collective challenges, such as sustaining the provision of free and regular public education. More than that, she developed a reflective sense about education that may

well have been somewhat uncommon even among formally trained teachers. She reflected on core issues of the Republic that related not only to her life as a teacher, but also as a citizen. She developed an observant gaze that allowed her to recognize the reality in which she taught and the structural shortcomings that compromised the very purpose of literacy education. In this sense, it can be said that she was *a republican teacher in the strictest sense of the term*.

Indeed, the case of the Minas Gerais teacher Alzira Vilela reveals fertile ground for the historical study of the teaching profession in Brazil through the use of the (auto)biographical method. By placing the subject in the foreground and the institution in the background, the relationships with society and its demands come to the surface. Her trajectory reveals, for instance, that more serious than having lay teachers in school groups was the absence of both teachers and schools; it also shows that certain elements of normal school training. Often regarded as essential to teaching, could, in fact, be grasped through effort, dedication, and the will to teach by those who wished to become primary school educators while already working in the field (though this does not invalidate the importance of formal teacher training initiatives). In other words, in a country where normal schools were lacking, being a lay teacher should not have been considered abnormal.

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