



The body of the nation: government positions on physical education during the Brazilian monarchy

Victor Andrade de Melo

Professor, Instituto de História/Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.
Largo de São Francisco, 1, sala 311
200051-070 – Rio de Janeiro – RJ – Brazil
victor.a.melo@uol.com.br

Fabio de Faria Peres

Professor, Instituto de História/Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.
Largo de São Francisco, 1, sala 311
200051-070 – Rio de Janeiro – RJ – Brazil
peres@ensp.fiocruz.br

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Abstract

In association with its nation building projects, the imperial government in Brazil under monarchic rule took some concrete actions based on proposals for physical education. The aim of this article is to investigate the meanings and significations attributed to this subject in the legislation and the annual reports issued by the Ministry of Business of the Empire (1831-1889), giving special attention to Rio de Janeiro. The approach to the subject in the sources researched demonstrates that the views of physical education took shape through a web of ideas that associated moral, health and civilization conceptions, in a bid to deal with the concrete circumstances of a newly independent peripheral nation with a bureaucratic structure in the process of formation.

Keywords: physical education; gymnastics; Brazilian monarchy.

When Brazil proclaimed its independence in 1822, what transpired to be a long process of debates about national projects and the nation's identity started to take shape. Initially, some pressing needs had to be addressed: maintenance of territorial unity and obtainment of international recognition for the country. As Bosi (2012, p.232) infers:

Brazil, like all the countries emerging from the colonial system, was a nation in search of an identity. It was essential for the generation that had obtained independence and its immediate descendants to identify what differentiated it from the metropolis that had dominated and shaped it for three centuries. This need for self-affirmation was expressed in two main directions: one, perspective, which derived from the present and delineated the future; the other, retrospective, which looked back.

Alberto da Costa e Silva (2011, p.29), in his analysis of the debates that took place in the constituent assembly of 1823 convened by Pedro I, aptly sums up the questionings that marked the beginnings of independence. "The first, about sovereignty: who had it, the people, the emperor or both? The second, about the autonomy of the provinces: should the empire be federative or unitarian? The third, about the position of the Portuguese in the new state: could they still dominate trade and be involved in politics?"

In this scenario, concerns were voiced about physical education: the Public Education Commission of the constituent assembly included it in their debates about the structuring of a Brazilian education system. According to one deputy, Belchior Pinheiro de Oliveira, a proposed competition for a "treaty on physical, moral and intellectual education for Brazil's young people" was discussed at length (Ferronato, 2006, p.103).

At the time, some writings were already in circulation on the subject, such as *Tratado de educação física dos meninos, para uso da nação portuguesa* [Treaty on physical education for boys, for use by the Portuguese nation] by a Brazilian physician, Francisco de Mello Franco, published in Portugal in 1790.¹ However, what interests us more here is the discussion of the topic in the context of the constituent assembly of 1823, as it represents the nation's leaders' first contact with the subject as they led the country in its first steps as an independent state.

Ferronato (2006, p.102) sees the way the subject was addressed by the constituent assembly as being clearly inspired by Enlightenment and liberal thinking, drawing on the ideas of John Locke, who proposed that "physical education was a means to strengthen man, improving his stamina and self-control".

The parliamentarians held diverging attitudes to the topic. Luiz José de Carvalho e Mello, a deputy for the state of Bahia, explicitly stated that education in Brazil at the time "was indeed literary, but not according to the worthy principles known today by worthy writers. ... It also fails to include physical education, which makes the body robust, healthy and well disposed for intellectual education, both of which are the basis for literary and moral education" (Brasil, 1874, p.144).

Ferronato (2006, p.108) suggests that this position was based on the idea that:

physical education was of fundamental importance for the intellectual development of young people. A strong body, he claims, and good health improved the inclination to study. Physical education and intellectual development were linked. Education, in the deputy's view, promoted good moral stature, good customs, and civic virtues

in men. It would forge citizens who were integrated with society, honest, upright, and supporters of the fatherland.

The notion of physical education was therefore not restricted to a school discipline, but constituted a broader concern. Mello clearly established a certain hierarchy, valuing the subject for what it might contribute to “intellectual education.” Furthermore, the relationship drawn, however imprecisely, between physical education, conceptions of morals and health, and the construction of the idea of nation, deserves attention.

At the same time, Martim Francisco Ribeiro de Andrada, also a member of the Public Education Commission, did not include physical education in the comprehensive plan he submitted for national education. His was a curious stance, because one of his theoretical references, Pestalozzi, had noted the potential value of this kind of education. A possible reason for its absence can be found in a particular interpretation of the Lancaster method,² which Andrada saw as a good strategy for reducing the cost of introducing an education system to Brazil.

In the event, the constituent assembly did not bear fruit, and was dissolved by Pedro I. The constitution passed in 1824 was very concise when it came to national education. Even so, it did establish free primary education as one of the “civil and political rights of Brazilian citizens, based on liberty, individual security, and propriety” (Brasil, 1824), and a series of debates were also held about the education system, indicating that the question was viewed as important for forging identities and the “formation of the people,” a process whose foundations lay in the notions of social stratification and the maintenance of order (Mattos, 1990; Gondra, 2008).

It was not just about building an “identity of intellectual and moral habits” through education, as Mattos (1990, p.271) notes, but also of developing an “identity of physical habits.” Both should be articulated and interlinked as the idea of “unity and nationality” was forged in a bid to elevate the empire to the status of a modern, civilized state.

A new constitution was only passed in 1891, but we should not forget the changes introduced by the 1834 amendment. From then on, at least in the municipality of the court, which broke away from the province of Rio de Janeiro, a greater number of initiatives can be perceived for structuring the education system, not least because the government was responsible for education in the capital city. In this context, concerns about physical education again came to the fore. It was considered in the Couto Ferraz Reform and the Leôncio de Carvalho Reform, and highlighted by Rui Barbosa in the opinion he wrote about the latter proposal, written in 1882.

How much attention was given to physical education by the first administrators of this burgeoning nation? What intentions were behind these initiatives? In addressing these questions, this study aims to discuss how this matter was addressed in the legislation and the annual reports issued by the Ministry of Business of the Empire,³ (which from here on we will call “reports”), particularly in relation to Rio de Janeiro, from 1831 to 1889, considering that this period

was the time of emergence and expansion of the modernization of urban infrastructure, our cultural life, albeit still constrained by the presence of high levels of illiteracy.

There was growth in education and research institutions, and an effective cultural system was consolidated, composed of producers, media and consumers of symbolic assets, which, as it was effectively a system, was not restricted to the great names, the great authors (Paula, 2012, p.179).

What we want to discuss are the senses and meanings attributed to physical education (conceptions about its functions), its role in education in general, and the design of concrete measures. We should make it clear from the outset that not all the positions analyzed saw it as a school discipline, although this dimension was also present. In fact, it really had to do with a broader range of issues seen as important (and even pressing) at the time, linked to civilizatory objectives that involved health and hygiene concerns (Gondra, 2008). New behaviors had to be adopted; the “physical” had to be educated.

We should bear in mind Vigarello’s (2003) idea that there are three aspects of bodily experience that should be investigated. The first is the “principle of effectiveness,” linked to the “education of the physical,” which has historically been manifested in questions related to strength and agility. The second has to do with the “principle of propriety,” involving changes in sensibilities and the “education of the spirit.” The third is the principle of identity,” which concerns involvement in larger collectivities (like “nation building”). It should also be borne in mind that “the references given to the form, effectiveness and functioning of the body change over time. Their representations shift to the point that they are sometimes completely transformed” (p.21).

One indication of how widely discussed this subject was in the realm of government is the space given over to it in the reports. On many occasions, it was related to the actions taken by the General Inspectorate of Primary and Secondary Education of the Municipality of the Court, and was addressed by leading imperial figures like Antônio Herculano de Sousa Bandeira Filho, outstanding not only for his legal career, but also for the fact that he was charged by Pedro II with the task of discovering how Germany ran its kindergartens on a voyage which had great repercussions for Brazilian education (Gondra, 2007). His administration at the inspectorate was marked by the attempt to organize, standardize and update the education system in the court (Castanha, 2012).

Another inspector who wrote about the topic was Eusébio de Queirós, a leading imperial figure better known for the creation of some laws (such as ones that curbed the slave trade and created a code for trade, both in 1850) and his involvement in the central political agenda during Pedro II’s reign. We should also mention José Bento da Cunha Figueiredo, whose administration was marked by the provision of broader access to education through measures that included the introduction of night schools.

Physical education was also addressed by some of the directors of the Central Board for Public Hygiene, which had since 1850 been responsible for sanitation issues in the country (Ribeiro, 1992). Two other presidents of the entity also wrote about the subject: Domingos José Freire, a renowned bacteriologist and public figure in nineteenth century Brazil (Benchimol, 1995), and Francisco de Paula Cândido, a leading physician and sanitarian.

We must be aware when working with these sources that we have access to just one perspective on the discussions of the topic at the time of monarchic rule in Brazil. Nonetheless,

it seems important for us to investigate the documents which expressed a significant part of the official concerns of the time, even if they did not always pan out into concrete interventions.

The reports sought to analyze the successes, failures and challenges of the projects conceived for the country, through the lens of their authors and their respective functionaries. Basically, they are an expression of the state's efforts to structure itself, and from them the following can be inferred: a process of specialization and division of labor in public administration (tasks distributed between different actors and institutions); a hierarchical structure (with more or less clearly defined areas of responsibility); the establishment of rules and norms for regulating and operating state political activities; the identification of objectives that oriented the public agenda and public practices. In other words, the reports can be seen as representing the "state in action" in a more or less consolidated way.⁴

We certainly do not believe that an analysis of this material is sufficient to capture the whole complexity of the life of the nation, with its far broader set of actors, tensions and interests, but we do believe that the reports reveal a "representation" (not a reflection) by the executive power of what imperial society was facing or should face based on the specific contingencies of the time.

These reports do not just synthesize certain perceptions; they also reveal the debates (and clashes) over how the various aspects of the country should be devised, planned and made operational. In this sense, they also give us access to a broad picture of the implementation (or lack thereof) of physical education-related initiatives from the viewpoint of those who were institutionally responsible for these actions.

In this article we will discuss only civil matters, leaving to one side for now the growing concerns about physical education in the military and measures taken as part of the armed forces reforms designed to assure the best possible preparation for Brazilian servicemen to serve in the conflicts that flared up as the national borders in this as yet unstable continent were defined.

This article presents the first findings of a larger project,⁵ which aims to investigate the relationship between different institutionalized bodily practices (mainly sports, gymnastics and dance) and certain notions linked to the construction of an idea of a nation: national identity, frontier defense, development of healthy and sanitary habits, organization of civil society, all from the perspective of Rio de Janeiro from 1831 to 1889.

Physical education: functions

What functions were envisaged for physical education in the sources analyzed? No conceptual uniformity was perceived in this area, but some common points deserve investigation.

A worthy life

"The aim of physical education is to regulate the housing, food, clothing, exercises, and everything else that impinges on the health of school children, so as to attain the proposed end in the general sphere of education" (Brasil, 30 abr. 1828): this is the first reference we encountered in the legislation – an imperial letter dated April 30, 1828, which includes the

bylaws of an orphanage in the city of Bahia, Casa Pia e Colégio de São Joaquim dos Meninos Órfãos.

In these bylaws, the idea of physical education is very broad ranging, and linked to behaviors as a whole:

The physical education school children were to receive was a veritable mixture of rules for life and behavior, quite in keeping with the ‘civility’ then in vogue. The pupils’ rooms should be ‘airy and visited by the sun.’ The under-12s would all sleep together in one dormitory, while the others would be split into different dormitories according to their age. Cold baths were recommended and were an integral part of health care. Bathing in the sea and swimming were particularly recommended. The rules of the orphanage prioritized hygiene (Matta, 1996, p.123, emphasis in the original).

Several items in the bylaws covered the issue of physical education for youths. We might ask why such concern with this topic when these initiatives were still nascent, and when anything not related to academic education was still viewed with circumspection. The profile of the institution may cast some light on this matter: “An education that involved little in the way of literacy was considered ideal for the orphans’ expected fate: manual work and handiwork. It was intentionally minimal, just enough for the orphans to blindly follow the routines of the arts and crafts, but were still able to perfect their processes and methods” (Matta, 1996, p.124).

The intention was explicit: “According to the bylaws the boys should be accustomed to ‘intemperance’ (discomfort). There were times during the week set aside for swimming and others for the teaching of elementary military tactics, when the boys would train using ‘sticks.’ The school’s intention was to avoid making the boys too ‘delicate’” (Matta, 1996, p.123; emphasis in the original).

The particular concern about physical education, which was even manifested in the suggestion that daily exercises be done, was related to a clear process of disciplining in articulation with a certain anti-intellectualism. The purpose was to educate individuals capable of withstanding the rigors of the work these institutionalized youths were expected to end up doing.

This should not be seen as an “anti-civility” process as such. It was actually a view of education that saw work as an instrument of “social regeneration” of the strata of society on the threshold of poverty (Gondra, 2008).

At the school in Bahia, despite such concerns, the first gym teacher was only hired in 1841. At the same time, at other institutions for “orphaned and unprotected boys” reference was also made to physical education, such as at Seminário de São Joaquim in Rio de Janeiro.

This seminary, founded in the eighteenth century and dissolved in 1818 by King Dom João, was reinstated by Dom Pedro in 1821 and completely reformed in 1831. Its new educational line was more geared towards the world of labor, giving physical activities greater space. In 1837, the seminary was turned into a public secondary school, the first of its kind in the country – Colégio Pedro II – which went on to become one of the most prestigious educational institutions in the empire.

In the documents consulted, the first reference to physical activity at Colégio Pedro II appears in the 1841 report (Vianna, 1843, p.13). It seems that a gym teacher had finally been

hired for the school, one Guilherme Luiz de Taube,⁶ whose trajectory we shall now discuss for the light it sheds on the network of relationships being built up around the subject.

A healthy life

In 1832, almost a decade before he was hired by Colégio Pedro II, Taube had asked the Medical Society of Rio de Janeiro (Sociedade de Medicina do Rio de Janeiro)⁷ to appraise a document he had written on the benefits of gymnastics. Luís Vicente de Simoni (1832, p.3)⁸ perceived the importance of the material, despite the lack of any scientific underpinning:

A memorandum that Mr. Guilherme Luiz Taube has submitted to this Society, with whose examination the honorable gentlemen have charged me, is not the work of a writer who proposes to illustrate this part of science, but rather of an individual who, intending to establish in this country a school, where gymnastics are done under his direction; aims to turn the public in favor of its establishment, and his objective; who, to assure to the same public the physical and moral usefulness of them, and the veracity of the assertions on which he bases them in his writing, turns to this Society, submitting to its judgment and approval his aforementioned work; not for it to judge its worth as a work, but its validity as an element directed to a public which may doubt of the principles expounded therein, and the utility of the institution which he proposes.

It is worth commenting on the quality of Simoni's (1832) writing, which demonstrates that by then there were already some quite deep-seated positions, at least amongst medical practitioners, about the value of physical education. According to the physician, many people owed to it "their strength, health, glory, prosperity" (p.8). He clearly regarded it as an activity that could "exert a great influence on the character, glory, and prosperity of a nation" (p.11).

The memorandum sheds some more light on Taube. He was Swedish and had worked as a gymnastics teacher at a school in New York. In Brazil he had served as a captain in the Imperial Army after marrying a Brazilian woman. He had lost his job as a result of a law passed on November 24, 1830 (Brasil, 24 nov. 1830),⁹ and it was this that had prompted him to return to the classroom.¹⁰

The medical society's involvement in the subject is no surprise. The link with health was already being proposed in the approach to physical education at schools. This sometimes took the form of recommendations that spilled out beyond this environment. For instance, in the 1851 report's discussion of the state of sanitation in the capital city, it observed the need to "establish the most vigilant inspection of the physical education of young people," who were marked by "great laziness" (Cândido, 1852, p.S2-17). School principals were called upon to pay the subject, in its broadest sense, more attention, which included eating habits, clothing, the adequacy of spaces, all related to the expectation of a healthier life.

The panorama sketched out by Gondra (2004) indicates how close a relationship there was between medicine, schools and physical education. The medical representatives reinforced the importance of articulating physical, moral and intellectual elements in the education of a generation expected to be exemplary, and therefore suitable for the intended modern, civilized nation.

In view of the growing preoccupations with the health of young people, it is no surprise that the Couto Ferraz Reform (Brasil, 17 fev. 1854), which set new standards for primary

and secondary education in the court, made explicit mention of physical education. Public schools were now required to teach rudimentary gymnastics.

Likewise, in the 1850s, gymnastics was included in the Colégio Pedro II curriculum, even if not as quickly as some actors wished. In the 1858 report, an education inspector, Eusébio de Queirós, while celebrating the progress achieved, expressed the desire for more: that day students should also have access to physical exercise, “a part of education that undoubtedly deserves the collaboration and assistance of all those who aspire to see Brazil’s youth attain the degree of development for which, indeed, it is so well disposed” (Câmara, 1859, p.A-E-13). This link between physical activity, youth, and the idea of the nation became increasingly common as the century ran its course.

The following year, the same inspector rejoiced: “It is a new stage of prosperity for both the establishments [the day school and the boarding school] of Pedro II imperial college, aware of the benefits of this counterpart necessary for education in general, and of which the young people of Brazil were almost completely deprived” (Câmara, 1860, p.A-H-15). It was hoped that this would speed up the spread of this discipline to the other schools at the court: “I urge its development, and wish to see it as soon as possible in all primary schools, and private schools, in some of which gymnastics are already done” (Câmara, 1860, p.A-H-15). For many years, such a desire was expressed in the reports.

A new context

This progress can be understood within the historical context of the empire under Pedro II’s rule. Lasting from 1831, when Pedro I abdicated the throne, to 1850, it was marked by great upheavals. The conflicts that had already been ongoing when Pedro I was emperor came to a head, including disagreements over the political projects designed to guide the nation building project (Morel, 2003).

This period of regency forced by Pedro I’s abdication when his son was just 5 years of age was marked by political instability, as well as considerable economic strife intensified by the payment of taxes to Portugal in compensation for independence and the trade privileges granted to the British, all agreed in the treaty that recognized Brazilian sovereignty signed in 1825 (Carvalho, 2012).

The solution was to declare the prince’s coming of age early, and so Pedro II was crowned in 1841 at just 15 years of age. The strategy seems to have paid off between 1840 and 1850: the emperor proved an important figure in settling armed conflicts, keeping the country unified, and imposing a degree of political stability.

As Chalhoub (2012, p.38) suggests, “1850 was a watershed in the political and social life of the empire.” From then on, the modernization process seen since the arrival of the Portuguese royal family and in the first decades of independence started to take better shape.

The idea that Brazil should be known for its civilization and its adoption of progressive ideas was increasingly reiterated, and this was helped by Pedro II’s own stance as he sought to present a figure of cultivation, pacifism, and interest in the development of the arts, sciences and education (Schwarcz, 1998).

It cannot be denied, however, that a number of contradictions marred this image, not least the continuation of slavery, which was only abolished in 1888, towards the end of the monarchic period.

Therefore, do not be mistaken, those who would think Rio de Janeiro was Paris. The court was an island surrounded on all sides by a rural environment, and slavery was everywhere. Basically, a calculated European elegance rubbed shoulders with the stench of the streets, as yet incipient trade, and a tiny court, and was very much marked by the colors and customs of Africa (Schwarcz, 1998, p.116).

Another stain was the fact that the capital city was repeatedly struck by epidemics.¹¹ These lay bare some of the city's problems, especially those relating to its infrastructure, the dearth of organized cleaning (including sanitation and water distribution) and a health system.

Nonetheless, the degree of stability and change was unprecedented. Rio de Janeiro gained ground as a decision-making hub, a space for the most important experiments in modernization, and a center from which new fashions and customs spread (Neves, 2011; Schwarcz, 2011). The progress fostered by Enlightenment thinking took shape in water distribution, a sewerage system, and transportation, as well as increasing concerns about public health and education.

In the 1860s, increasing mention was made of physical education in the legislation and the reports. It also started to become a fixture in school life. In 1865, 143 students at Colégio Pedro II were enrolled to do gymnastics (Brasil, 1866, p.A-D-N4), more than were registered for most of the other subjects (explicable by the fact that it was open to students of all ages). Meanwhile, in Rio de Janeiro in 1866, there were 566 secondary school pupils enrolled to do gymnastics (Brasil, 1867, p.A-C-N7). This figure grew as the decade progressed.

Swimming was also introduced to the school curriculum. In 1866, 311 private school children enrolled to have swimming lessons, while by 1869 this figure had risen to 359.¹² In 1870, the first suggestions started to be aired about the need for swimming baths to be built at Colégio Pedro II. In 1877 the board responsible for improving the education system at the court posed the following question: "Would it not be preferable for the gymnastics done at our schools to be supplemented very specially by those of swimming? If so, by what means could this best be achieved?" (Figueiredo, 1878, p.A-C2-24).

The state of affairs was not so promising in the other provinces. According to the 1869 report, "the gymnastics normally taught, even at Europe's most modern establishments, and which contributes to the physical development of our young people, ... is only known in one or another province, as if its adoption were problematic" (Souza, 1870, p.51).

Repeated reference is made to the development of this discipline in Europe. In fact, one of the ramifications of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War was an increased interest in sport, which was already common practice in Britain (Holt, 1989). There was also interest in gymnastics in this country, which was already greatly valued in Germany (Holt, Vigarello, 2008). Indeed, Weber (1988) identifies a degree of conflict between the supporters of different types of physical education.

Holt and Vigarello (2008) found that these growing concerns about physical education had to do with the new requirements of modernity, with the new organization of society,

and parameters of health and civility. Soares (1994) suggests that these movements had an impact on how physical education was conceived in Brazil. This was particularly clear in Rio de Janeiro during the imperial years.

In fact, we should not be so optimistic about the rate of progress in the court. The overview sketched out in the 1873 report is typical of how physical education was provided in primary schools.

This important part of education is not only entirely ignored at our schools for the absence of any exercises conducive to the physical development of the students, but even hampered by the detrimental system of benches and tables, the cramped rooms, in many of which the children have difficulty moving around, and the stank air they breathe in them (Corrêa, Garcia, Jordão, 1874, p.A-B7-37).

The idea of physical education continued to meld health and hygiene conditions with physical exercises, which were understood as a strategy for the development of healthy habits. It was understood that schools should have an important role in this respect, seeking the “harmonious development of the boys’ faculties and organism” (Corrêa, Garcia, Jordão, 1874, p.A-B7-37). Indeed, gymnastics should not be understood as being set apart from the other subjects, but as contributing towards the other educational goals.

A slight difference in the approach to the subject emerged as it started to gain importance in its own right for the specific contributions it made to bodily education, not necessarily linked to intellectual development (although this connection did not cease to be made).

Ultimately, the value given to physical education had to do with the close link between the physical, moral and intellectual domains in childhood education. In Gondra’s (2004, p.12) terms, it was the “utopia of holistic education,” which was somehow permeated by a perspective that saw schools “as a place for curing a society described in terms of lack of civility, disorder ... and lack of reason”.

Meanwhile, the increasing appreciation of physical education for the specific contributions it could potentially make to the education of the body per se was associated with the rise and increased legitimization of medical-scientific knowledge. Chalhoub (1996) has described this as the “emergence of the ideology of hygiene,” which became a self-proclaimed authority that simultaneously rejected other practices and forms of knowledge deemed unscientific.

Pressing needs

Even if the introduction of gymnastics at school was still hampered, concern about the subject continued to grow in the 1870s. This many well have been related to an event that had a great impact on the nation building process: the Paraguay War (December 1864 to March 1870).

The conflict had a powerful impact on Brazilian society. Its culmination coincided with the peak of the empire, even in terms of the unification of the land. The people largely rallied around the armed conflict, despite the many criticisms of the participation of the armed forces. Indeed, one of the ramifications was the new value given to certain symbols of nationalism, like the national anthem and flag.

However, even though Brazil was victorious, the difficulties faced by the Brazilian armed forces exposed national weaknesses. These were compounded by economic factors:

The financial consequences for Brazil were disastrous. Public spending grew by over one thousand percent. The government was forced to raise taxes, mint more money, and take out loans domestically and abroad summing 76 thousand contos de réis. The total cost of the war was calculated by the government at 614 thousand contos, or around 49 million US dollars (Carvalho, 2012, p.106).

The years after the end of the conflict were marked by the longest ever term of a Ministry of the Empire under the Viscount of Rio Branco (1871-1875). This resulted in some reforms of existing institutions (the police force, the legal system and the National Guard) and old policies considered important for the nation (like encouraging immigration), as well as incentives linked to the structuring of the state (the first national census, a telegraph link to Europe, more railways, and improved shipping conditions).

In particular, two outcomes of the Paraguay War deserve attention for their influence on ending the monarchy: increased pressure to end slavery, and a strengthened *esprit de corps* in the Brazilian army. Tensions between liberals and conservatives were heightened, and republican parties started to be formed.

In this context, increasing concerns were voiced about how the citizens should be prepared to serve the nation whenever necessary. There was an explicit need to consider strategies designed for the education of the body and spirit of Brazilian people more seriously, something that was particularly marked in the writing of one of the physicians involved in the war, Eduardo Augusto Pereira de Abreu, author of *Estudos higiênicos sobre a educação física, intelectual e moral do soldado: escolha do pessoal para a boa organização do nosso Exército* [Hygiene studies about the physical, intellectual and moral education of soldiers: the choice of personnel for the good organization of our Army] from 1867.¹³

This context, in which “new pressing needs” were described, was reflected in the structuring of physical education at schools, not just for the purposes of valuing gymnastics, but for the inclusion of military exercises. More rigor was expected of the teachers in the strategies they employed.

At Colégio Pedro II, gymnastics became mandatory, and the syllabus required clear methods for its teaching. The 1870 regulations even determined that the students be split into three groups according to their physical development. Only those students who had a proven health problem would be excused from these lessons (Brasil, 1 fev. 1870).

In 1876, a method designed to provide public recognition for the best performing students was created. “Towards the end of the school year, at the date set by the Principal, there will be one or more public sessions of exercises by the students who have taken gymnastics classes. ... Of the students who have most distinguished themselves ... mention will be made of the grades they obtained in the examinations in the subjects every year (Brasil, 1 mar. 1876).

The 1881 regulations reinforce the need for this determination to be fulfilled. Gym teachers must “send the Principal a list of the students who have distinguished themselves in performance and good conduct every year.” This list would be “published in the *Diário Oficial* [official government newspaper] and recorded in a special book from which any certificates required may be extracted” (Brasil, 24 mar. 1881).

Physical education in primary and secondary schools in Rio de Janeiro was highlighted in the reports by Rui Barbosa when he was a member of the Public Education Commission of the Chamber of Deputies and when he wrote the aforementioned Leôncio de Carvalho Reform (Brasil, 19 abr. 1879).¹⁴

In fact, physical education had already been made mandatory in 1877, although “at existing, equipped primary schools it is not mandatory until three years after the passing of this Regulation” (Brasil, 18 jan. 1877), a curious provision if we recall that physical education had actually been made mandatory in 1854 – proof that the previous law had not been widely enforced.

The challenge was how to deal with the reality of the education system. Hurdles still had to be overcome in teacher training, the supply of suitable physical spaces, and even resistance to the nature of the activity, which some considered inappropriate (and even undignified) for a school environment, topics which often came up in the reports.

In 1883, according to the general inspector's evaluation, the picture was no better than it had been ten years earlier. “The teaching of gymnastics, drawing and music, despite having been made obligatory for teachers by art. 23 of Decree no.6.479 of January 18, 1877, is to this day not practiced unless sporadically” (Bandeira Filho, 1884, p.A-C7-17).

He noted that the legal deadline for the widespread introduction of the subject had already expired, and that a *New guide for the teaching of gymnastics at the public schools of Prussia* had been distributed, translated on ministerial order by Joaquim Teixeira de Macedo, one of those who were involved in developing national public education and who defended the adoption of the principles of German pedagogy. The problem, in his view, was that teachers did not have the habit or even the means of retraining.

In 1884, physical education was again mentioned by the Central Board for Public Hygiene (Junta Central de Higiene Pública), then under the chairmanship of Domingos José Freire. When it issued a report on the epidemics in Rio de Janeiro, suggesting that the “means for preventing the diseases are multiple, all of which call for distancing the debilitating causes,” it also criticized the fact that “in most of our schools, physical education is ignored” (Freire, 1884, p.A-F2-24).

The following year, the optional nature of physical education became even more marked, with the subject being associated with infant mortality. As such, it was put on the same plane as other problems: “Are the flaws in physical education responsible for such a dire outcome [high death rate amongst infants]? Is it syphilitic infection? Does slavery contribute to a great extent to the extinction of life at birth? All these causes may coexist, but it is to be believed that one of them has a more powerful influence than the others” (Freire, 1885, p.A-F-10).

Freire wrote about the shortfalls in the physical education of mothers and children, bringing the subject closer to the areas of hygiene and the raising of children. He saw schools as the crux of the matter. “To develop understanding without attending to the needs of the physical is to provide an incomplete education. The modern tendency has been thus, in contrast with the old method of providing exclusive corporal education, which created giants and Herculean athletes, without the slightest light of intellectual evolution (Freire, 1885, p.A-F-10).

For the physician, citing Plato and Spencer, it was a matter of bringing more balance to schools. “There is therefore a need to find a compromise: stimulate the intellectual faculties

without failing to provide sufficient exercise for the bodily organs. The principle that should rule the education of children is this harmonious consensus between physical and intellectual development” (Freire, 1885, p.A-F-10).

Freire recalled that other countries had already successfully adopted such a strategy. “Gymnastics and military education at primary schools is adopted in Germany, France and other countries. Suitable handbooks are distributed to the teachers, as are collections of apparatus to equip the school gymnasia and a certain number of weapons for target practice and fencing” (Freire, 1885, p.A-F-10).

This was and will always be a differential in institutionalized physical activities. The functions conceived for them spill out beyond the school environment, overlapping in multiple ways with other social dimensions (hygiene and border defense, for instance). Furthermore, they are also taught outside schools. At that time there were teachers teaching other activities (e.g. gymnastics, swimming, fencing, horse riding) at private clubs and establishments, not to mention the gymnastics on display at circuses and theaters, amusing a society that increasingly valued public entertainment. All these experiments had a reflection on schools. School and extra-school activities interacted the whole time, but not always harmoniously.

A last point worth mentioning is how physical education in general and gymnastics in particular were addressed at the educational conferences, fairs and congresses held as of 1873, events whose aim was to “consult the enlightened minds and experience of accomplished persons, submitting the main subjects concerning public education to their collective study” (Velloso, 1883, p.83). In order to help spread and standardize knowledge and teacher training, they were frequented by the most distinguished personages involved in education, including intellectual leaders (Bastos, 2003; Borges, Gondra, 2005).

The ninth primary education conference, held in 1886, highlighted discussions on subjects relating to physical education, including teacher training and development. The second part of the event was given over to the teaching of gymnastics, discussing its stage of development at the time, how it could be taught, how these methods could be evaluated, and what curricula should be adopted. Indeed, the subject had already been under the spotlight at the 1884 Education Congress of Rio de Janeiro (Herold Júnior, 2007).

Without doubt, this was a subject that attracted great interest in those final years of the Brazilian monarchy.

Final considerations

We have observed a dual focus in the way physical education was discussed in the legislation and reports. The different references expressed, to a greater or lesser extent, two different sets of beliefs about the historical circumstances that shaped how it was regarded and experienced.

One of these had to do with the adoption and adaptation, by part of Brazil’s intelligentsia, of (mostly European) ideas that expressed a liberal perspective on the spread of models of civilization and civility between different strata of the population. As Gondra (2008, p.69) suggests:

or the elites who were running the empire, the ideals and discourses in favor of civilization became the basis for a number of political projects and administrative measures that guided the constitution of the national state. The expression became a kind of panacea to legitimize actions put forward as a means of overcoming the ills and problems of the nation ... In the eyes of the contemporaries who shared the same ideas of civilization, there was a pressing need for the Brazilian empire to educate and instruct its people.

The Enlightenment conception of civilization and culture – always expressed in the singular and associated with ideas of progress and reason (Cuche, 2002) – inspired the view of the intellectuals of the empire: the utopia of forming a whole man, educating him in such a way as to integrate his physical, intellectual and moral aspects.

Contributing to one of these three aspects, educating the body in the strict sense of the term (i.e. physical education as a discipline that involves movement, gymnastics, military exercises, etc.) and in its broader sense (physical education as posture, clothing, etc.) was part of the “civilizatory” project of the imperial state, taking inspiration from societies then deemed models of development.

A different idea, which still complemented the imported civilizatory ideology, can help us understand not just the different meanings attributed to physical education, but also how the idea took shape in Brazil after colonial times. The prevailing economic, political and social conditions – i.e. the peculiarities of this peripheral, slavocratic, predominantly agrarian, newly independent country with a rudimentary bureaucratic structure in the process of formation – implied different particularities in the structuring of such interventions, involving both the functioning and modus operandi of the discipline and the challenges and hurdles facing its consolidation.

As such, if on one level repeated reference was made to the general and therefore more abstract role of physical education (an understanding guided by the ideas of civilization and holistic education), on the other certain initiatives that were more or less articulated on a more general plane aimed to take account of the concrete problems and specific nature of the reality. Both were manifested in the discourse used in the reports and the legislation. The way they were configured helped foster legitimacy for the representations contained in the positions, in that they were capable of forging a more or less coherent bond between ideas and historical conditions.

Interestingly, we are not defending the thesis of any “inadequacy” between the ideas and the social environment or suggesting that the “ideas were out of place.” Far less are we interested in defending a supposed particularism and reification of the social conditions. What matters is to perceive, from the relationship between ideas and social development, the (mis)match between structure and intellectual output, what a “peculiar meaning” physical education had in the social dynamics of the empire.

On the eve of republicanism, gymnastics was on the authorities’ agenda as one of the many concerns relating to physical education. Its introduction to schools did not progress as much as was hoped, but it was certainly already a reality by the time the monarchic period ended. The initiatives put forward by (and during) the empire were translated into political projects that laid bare the construction of an idea of corporal education to which postures

and valued deemed crucial for the country were linked. It was a nation that was literally and symbolically being “embodied.”

NOTES

¹ There is another book of the same name by Francisco José de Almeida dated 1791. For more information on the works, see Abreu (2006).

² Englishman Joseph Lancaster (1778-1838) formulated a teaching method that was also called the Lancasterian or monitorial method. In 1827, by means of a law passed on October 15 that “had schools of basic literacy created in all the towns, villages and most populous places of the empire,” the use of the method in the empire was institutionalized. For more on this subject, see Neves (2003).

³ The Ministry of Business of the Empire (Ministério dos Negócios do Império) was created in 1823 and remained active throughout the monarchic period. It had a great influence on the administration of the court (Rio de Janeiro), including questions related to education.

⁴ The term used is similar, if not identical, to the meaning given by Jobert and Muller (1987).

⁵ “The body of the nation: educating the physical, disciplining the spirit, forging the country: institutionalized bodily practices in the society of the Court (1831-1889),” which has received funding from Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro and Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico.

⁶ For more information on physical education at Colégio Pedro II, see Cunha Júnior (2008).

⁷ Created in 1829, it brought together physicians keen to debate, raise awareness and advise the government about health and hygiene issues.

⁸ An Italian who trained as a physician in his fatherland and moved to Brazil in 1817, where he held leading positions. For further information, see Simoni (s.d.).

⁹ By the terms of this law, foreigners were discharged from the army or forbidden to serve, with the exception of men who had taken part in the campaign of independence, or been disabled or seriously injured in conflicts.

¹⁰ Simoni’s publication also drew the attention of Góis Junior (2013).

¹¹ For further information, see Chalhoub (1996) and Benchimol (2001).

¹² It is worth stressing that from 1871 onwards, students enrolling to do fencing were also recorded. See Brasil (1872).

¹³ For a discussion of this work, see Silva and Melo (2011).

¹⁴ A fair appraisal of Rui Barbosa’s positions on the subject can be read in Marinho (1980). See also Machado (2002).

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