

## Intellectuals and language games: the discourse on Primary Education at the First National Education Conference (1927)

*Intelectuais e jogos de linguagem: o discurso sobre a Educação Primária na I Conferência Nacional de Educação (1927)*

*Intelectuales y juegos de lenguaje: el discurso sobre la Educación Primaria en la I Conferencia Nacional de Educación (1927)*

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### ABSTRACT

This article has as its object the educational discourse enunciated in the First National Conference on Education (I CNE), organized by the Brazilian Association of Education (BAE), whose central theme was primary education. We start from the premise that BAE and its conferences were privileged places to project an *intelligentsia* authorized to talk about the problems of national education. The sources used refer to documents related to BAE and the I CNE, with emphasis on the 113 theses presented and discussed at the event. Regarding methodology, we have opted for an interlocution with the history of intellectuals and intellectual history, especially the contributions of linguistic contextualism to understand the language practiced in the I CNE. In the conclusions, we characterize educational discourse as a complex language, which has at its horizon the combination of concepts derived from the medical-sanitarian, civic-nationalist and religious discourses.

**Keywords:** Educational Discourse. Intellectuals. Brazilian Association of Education.

### RESUMO

Este artigo teve como objeto o discurso educacional enunciado na Primeira Conferência Nacional de Educação (ICNE), organizada pela Associação Brasileira de Educação (ABE), cujo tema central foi o ensino primário. Partimos da premissa de que a ABE e as suas conferências foram lugares privilegiados para projetar uma *intelligentsia* autorizada a falar sobre os problemas da educação nacional. As fontes utilizadas referem-se a documentos relacionados à ABE e à ICNE, com destaque para as 113 teses apresentadas e discutidas no evento. Em termos metodológicos, privilegamos a interlocução com a história dos intelectuais e a história intelectual, especialmente as contribuições do contextualismo linguístico para a compreensão da linguagem praticada na I CNE. Nas conclusões, pretendemos caracterizar o discurso educacional como uma linguagem complexa, que tem como horizonte a combinação de conceitos oriundos dos discursos médico-sanitarista, cívico-nacionalista e religioso.

**Palavras-chave:** Discurso Educacional. Intelectuais. Associação Brasileira de Educação.

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objeto el discurso educativo enunciado en la Primera Conferencia Nacional de Educación (ICNE), organizada por la Asociación Brasileña de Educación (ABE), cuyo tema central fue la educación primaria. Partimos de la premisa de que la ABE y sus conferencias fueron lugares privilegiados para proyectar una *intelligentsia* autorizada a hablar sobre los problemas de la educación nacional. Las fuentes utilizadas se refieren a documentos relacionados con la ABE y la ICNE, con destaque para las 113 tesis presentadas y discutidas en el evento. En términos metodológicos, privilegiaremos la interlocución con la historia de los intelectuales y la historia intelectual, especialmente las contribuciones del contextualismo lingüístico para la comprensión del lenguaje practicado en la ICNE. En las conclusiones, pretendemos caracterizar el discurso educacional como un lenguaje complejo, que tiene como horizonte la combinación de conceptos oriundos de los discursos médico-sanitarista, cívico-nacionalista y religioso.

**Palabras clave:** Discurso Educacional. Intelectuales. Asociación Brasileña de Educación.

The object of this article is the educational discourse enunciated at the *Primeira Conferência Nacional de Educação* (First National Education Conference [ICNE], organized by the *Associação Brasileira de Educação* (Brazilian Education Association) [ABE], which had primary education as its central theme. We start from the premise that the ABE and its conferences were privileged places to project an intelligentsia authorized to speak about the problems and, above all, about the projects and priorities of national education. The ICNE represented the beginning of a sequence of 13 national meetings held by ABE between 1927 and 1967, which outlined a field of political, theoretical and institutional disputes.

The intellectuals who were members of the ABE, created in 1924, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, reaffirmed their understanding, common in the Brazilian intellectual scene since the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of the mission of the educated elites in the formation of national consciousness. From this viewpoint, primary school was the privileged place for the formation of this civic consciousness, disseminating conduct and feelings associated with the ideas of hard work, order, hygiene and civic pride.

The ICNE in particular, and the National Education Conferences (CNEs) in general, became places, unprecedented in the history of education in Brazil, where the debate on education reverberated, bringing together physicians, lawyers, engineers, primary, secondary and university teachers, as well as public administrators and journalists interested in the subject of national education. The discussion that took place at these events went beyond the limits of pedagogical interest and education specialists, to become a strategic agenda for the affirmation of Brazil as a country in line with the modernization process that was impacting different countries in the Americas and Europe. This event took place at a time of intense discussion about the educational reforms that were being implemented in different Brazilian states; it also affirmed ABE's wish to organize a national educational system, overcoming, according to the vision of the intellectuals who led the Association, the fragmentation and disarticulation of policies, teaching methods, curricula and educational processes underway in the country's different states and regions.

The sources used in this work are documents related to the ABE and the ICNE. Among these we highlight the 113 theses presented, discussed and voted during the event. In methodological

terms we will concentrate on two fronts of interlocution: the history of intellectuals and intellectual history, especially the contributions of linguistic contextualism for the understanding of the language manipulated by the intellectuals engaged in the so-called *educational cause*.

Regarding the history of intellectuals, we will explore its potential to explain the public behavior of the literate elites involved in the production of educational discourse, between the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>, considering their political strategies, beliefs and social intervention projects. We start from the concept of intellectual put forward by Vieira (2011), who, aiming to understand the public behavior of intellectuals, characterized them considering the following aspects:

- 1) a sense of belonging to the social stratum that, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, produced the social identity of the intellectual; 2) political engagement motivated by the feeling of mission or social duty; 3) elaboration and propagation of the discourse that establishes the relation between education and modernity; 4) assumption of the centrality of the State as a political agent capable of carrying out social reforms. (p. 3)

Regarding analysis of the educational discourse, we will explore its interlocution with linguistic contextualism, considered as a theory of interpretation of historical sources, developed especially by the historians of political thought John Pocock and Quentin Skinner. We believe that contextualism enables understanding of educational discourse as a language game, based on the comprehension of the linguistic behavior of its players. This approach provides an understanding of the linguistic variety used by those who intended to create and disseminate modes of argumentation and, by extension, means of persuasion capable of enabling political and educational projects.

Language games are structured enunciative situations that impose rules, tacitly accepted by the players or linguistic actors, about what can be said, by whom, when and how. The language game represents a communication situation that is contextualized in time and space and recorded in empirical sources that can be treated historically.

Added to the notion of language game is the concept of *complex language*, systematically expounded by Pocock (2003), in which words from different origins combine to form a particular way of speaking. For Pocock, political discourse is a *complex language*, since it appropriates terms from different discourses (religious, scientific and/or economic), to produce a particular way of speaking for use in political disputes. Taking the concept proposed by Pocock about political discourse, we will examine the educational discourse at the INCE, in which we have identified the presence of lexicon from other language games, particularly those used by religious, medical-sanitary and civic-nationalist discourses. In the analysis of this language, we will focus on the words that worked as normative concepts, i.e., those that formed the core of the semantic field that produced the main meanings and uses of the discourse used at the ICN.<sup>1</sup>

## THE BRAZILIAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION AND THE I NATIONAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE

Diverse researchers have investigated the ABE and the events it held. The 1927 ICNE has been the most studied conference, examples of which include: Ferreira (1988), Schmidt (1997), Galter (2002), Bona Júnior (2005), Vieira (2007), Vieira and Bona Júnior (2007) and Vieira and

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1 We understand semantic field to be a set of words that are interrelated due to their properties in order to produce meanings, giving rise to a specialized lexicon.

Faria (2019). Standing out among texts that have examined other ABE conferences or its work are: Carvalho (1998), who addresses the first eight years of ABE's existence by problematizing notions of hygiene, morality and work used in ABE discourse; Linhales (2006), who reflects on sport and Physical Education at ABE events between 1925 and 1935; Strang (2008), who discusses the behavior of Catholic intellectuals during the period between the creation of the ABE until they broke away from the Association in the 1930s; Marques (2008), who analyzes the ABE's patriotic discourse during the Second World War; Valério (2013), who problematizes the issue of secondary education between 1928 and 1942; Vieira (2017a), who analyzes the educational discourse used in the 13 ABE conferences between 1927 and 1967; and Vieira (2019), who analyzes the IX Congress held in 1945, and its discussion regarding the concept of democratic education in the contexts of the end of World War 2 and the *Estado Novo* in Brazil.<sup>2</sup>

Like the authors listed above, we consider ABE's national events to be privileged moments for capturing the educational discourse used, since these meetings had national coverage and brought together the main protagonists of this debate, whether they were renowned or low-profile figures in the educational field. Nevertheless, although in different positions, these linguistic players interacted in the process of producing a language game, which characterizes and defines the main issues in dispute in the educational field. A game that contained shared rules of enunciation, specific modes of argumentation, and varied uses of available vocabulary, according to the ideological horizons of those involved and the nature of the projects in dispute.<sup>3</sup>

The ABE was created in 1924 and according to the minutes of its founding meeting,

after some other preparatory work, the Statutes of the Association were approved and the 6 members referred to in paragraph 1 of Article 4 of the Statutes were elected to comprise the Board of Directors. Those elected were: Heitor Lyra da Silva, Levi Fernandes Carneiro, Antonio Carneiro Leão, D. Bertha Lutz, Mario Paulo de Brito and Vicente Licínio Cardoso, whereby the second-to-last was elected general secretary and the latter was elected treasurer. (ABE, 1927, p. 1)

The foundation of the ABE was the result of intellectuals coming together around a manifest objective: raising the nation's awareness of the issue of education which, according to that group's interpretation, even following the advent of the Republic, remained on the fringe of the State's initiatives. In this sense, article 1 of ABE's statute states: "the purpose of the Brazilian Education Association is to promote, in Brazil, the diffusion and improvement of education in all its branches, stimulating initiatives that can more effectively achieve these objectives" (ABE, 1924, p. 7). We identified that, in detail, the ABE's objectives were:

1. To permanently organize statistics on instruction in Brazil;
2. To periodically publish a journal, bulletins and reports on education and instruction issues;
3. To maintain a permanent school museum, a pedagogical library, a conference room, and courses;
4. To promote and to reward the production and publication of good didactic books;
5. To promote regional or national congresses on education;
6. To promote Brazil's representation at educational congresses abroad;
7. To organize

2 The sources reveal a change in the name of the event, from National Education Conferences to Brazilian Education Congresses, with effect from the VIII CBE, in 1942. Notwithstanding, the change in the event's name did not alter its format or objectives.

3 Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field is not a central heuristic apparatus in this analysis; however, when we use the expression we are supported by the Bourdieusian idea that defines the field as a social space of relations, where the criteria of nomination, classification and social distinction are established/imposed. Bourdieu emphasizes the relationship between fields, but also sustains the relative autonomy of these spaces.

an archive of national and foreign legislation on teaching and related issues; 8. To facilitate the purchasing of books and school material by its members; 9. To cooperate with all work regarding physical, moral and civic education; 10. To facilitate the development of educational films, children's libraries and other teaching aids; 11. To assist national and foreign school exchanges; 12. To organize mutual work between teachers and between pupils; 13. To study and aid popular education, whether regarding intellectual, moral, and physical culture, or regarding professional instruction. (ABE, 1924)

The intellectuals who headed the ABE considered primary school to be the privileged place for the formation of the Brazilian people, disseminating conduct and feelings expressed in normative concepts dear to this elite, such as: cleanliness, sobriety, hard work, civism, order, national consciousness, national identity, Brazilian people, race, instruction, civilization, progress, modernity, among other related terms. In the first three years of the ABE's existence, its actions were restricted to small circles and the federal capital, limited mainly to the intellectuals who comprised it. However, with effect from 1927, the Association sought to give greater visibility and scope to its ideas and projects and began to promote events nationwide. According to the regulations defined by the ABE, the National Education Conferences (CNE) were to be held annually. The minutes of the ICNE preparatory meeting reveal this goal:

Moving forward with the carrying out of its educational program, the Brazilian Education Association has decided to hold, in all Brazilian states, national education conferences with the participation of all federative units, aiming to congregate all Brazilian teachers around the highest ideals of civism and morality. The separatist spirit that sometimes reveals itself here and there will be combated, working nobly for national Unity. (ABE, 1927)

The events adopted a system of organization that changed little during the period between 1927 and 1967, namely: the main themes, which worked as guidelines for the debate; the thematic commissions, which acted as filters for the discussions that would take place in the plenary sessions; and the system of submission of theses by conference-goers that, if approved by the thematic commissions, would be discussed and possibly approved in the plenary sessions (Chart 1). In this sense, the ICNE represented the beginning of a sequence of national meetings that outlined a project for social and cultural intervention of great magnitude. The belief in education as the privileged means to solve national problems was widely shared and Mário Pinto Serva, an ICNE participant, concisely expressed this sense that characterized the ABE discourse:

the problem of the education of the Brazilian people is the most national of all problems. It is the biggest problem in national history. It is almost the only national problem, because education, generalized and widespread, naturally by itself solves all other problems. It is the infrastructure of collective organization. (ABE, 1927, n. 103)

The ICNE, which began strategically on December 19, 1927, marked the celebrations of the political emancipation of the Province of Paraná, and the Paraná press highlighted both the beginning of the Conference discussions on education and also the results. The news item published by the *Gazeta do Povo* newspaper about the preparations for the event depicts the city of Curitiba, capital of the state of Paraná, as being mobilized:

**Chart 1 – Year, Venue and Theme of the Brazilian Education Association events (1927–1967).**

Year	Venue	Theme (s)
1927	Curitiba	Primary education.
1928	Belo Horizonte	Secondary education.
1929	São Paulo	Primary, secondary and professional education; health education.
1931	Rio de Janeiro	Popular education.
1933	Niterói	Preparation of the preliminary project for national organization of education.
1934	Fortaleza	General organization of teaching in Brazil.
1935	Rio de Janeiro	Physical education.
1942	Goiânia	Primary education, especially for people who live in rural areas.
1945	Rio de Janeiro	Concept of democratic education.
1950	Rio de Janeiro	Suggestions for the <i>Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional</i> [Law of Directives and Bases of National Education] (LDB).
1954	Curitiba	Funding of public education systems.
1956	Salvador	Processes of democratic education at the different levels of teaching and in life outside of school.
1967	Rio de Janeiro	Education for the development of science and technology.

Source: prepared by the author.

At 9 a.m. the capital's school groups are to be at Praça da Universidade, to perform gymnastics and undertake a civic parade, according to what the General Education Inspectorate has established. The First National Education Conference will be opened at 1 p.m. at the Teatro Guairá. No dress code is required. All teachers of the capital's educational institutes are expected to attend. (Gazeta do Povo, December 18, 1927)

The authorities present at the opening ceremony also show the importance given to this moment, as the speakers were Caetano Munhoz da Rocha, President of the State of Paraná and representative of the Honorary President of the Congress, President of the Republic Washington Luís; D. João Braga, Metropolitan Archbishop of Curitiba; Justice Clotário Portugal, General Secretary of the State; and Dr. João Moreira Garcez, Mayor of the City of Curitiba.

Apart from the authorities, “there were more than four hundred delegates, three hundred high school students and around a further two thousand people, so that the Teatro Guaíra took on an imposing appearance” (ABE, 1927). In the ABE of the 1920s, Catholics formed the largest and most organized group. This is evidence that can explain why the city of Curitiba hosted the ICNE, since Lysímaco Ferreira da Costa, the representative of the Paraná state government at the conference and its main rapporteur, was close to the Catholics who exercised a strong influence over the Paraná government. Of the 17 states that sent official representatives, only the state of Rio de Janeiro was represented by a woman. According to the sources analyzed, the conference was to be attended by:

- a) Representatives of the States and the Federal District;
- b) The president and delegates of the Brazilian Education Association;
- c) Teachers from public and private higher, secondary or professional courses in Brazil and the educated people who

have adhered to this noble initiative; d) The board of administrators and teachers of the University of Paraná, as well those of the secondary schools, teacher training schools, complementary professional schools, school groups, public and private primary schools, colleges, etc., of the State of Paraná. (ABE, 1927)<sup>4</sup>

Standing out among the documents produced by the event are the 113 theses submitted by the participants, which were debated and voted in the final plenary session. The ICNE had eight Thematic Commissions: two on primary education; one on secondary education; three on general topics; one on health education; and one on higher education. The ABE Board of Directors drafted and presented four theses that served as guidelines for the debate. The theses they proposed were as follows:

1 - national unity: a) literary culture; b) civic culture; c) moral culture; 2 - uniformization of the main concepts of primary education, maintaining freedom of programs; 3 - creation of higher education teacher training schools in different parts of the country; 4 - organization of national cadres, technical, scientific and literary development improvement corporations. (ABE, 1927)

These theses guided the Conference, so that the themes of the nation, national unity and the formation of national consciousness—which were present in political discussions during the process of the country's independence from Portuguese rule and throughout the imperial period—took on new contours during the Republic. The formation of republican citizen consciousness, according to ABE leaders, depended on a program based on the teaching of the native language, national history and geography, notions of hygiene, and civic and patriotic education (Carvalho, 1998, p. 225).

In the formation program advocated by the ABE intellectuals in 1927, moral and political formation took precedence over humanistic and scientific formation. In this sense, the belief in the redeeming power of the school was not associated exclusively with the diffusion of knowledge, but rather with the dissemination of moral and civic values. At the head of this project for the formation of the Brazilian people were intellectuals, represented and self-represented as privileged interpreters and guides of the nation's interests.

Besides the themes presented by the ABE board, the following issues were highlighted: new pedagogies, with emphasis on the so-called intuitive method; nationalization of European immigrants who maintained ethnic schools, spreading their cultural and linguistic traditions; and the issues of health education, school hygiene and eugenics.

Press reaction to the Conference was generally positive, but opposition and tensions were perceptible. The *O Dia* newspaper protested with the following note: "According to what was said in the streets yesterday, the National Education Conference has been declared closed (...)What was spent, what was lost in those seven or eight days of the Conference was a lot of money, a lot of time, and nothing useful came of it" (*O Dia*, December 24, 1927). What we saw "was just theorizing, utopian stuff, speeches and more speeches and nothing useful, nothing usable" (*O Dia*, December 24, 1927). And, in the same acid tone, the newspaper concluded its remarks as follows: "It was about time, therefore, to put an end to this elaborate, expensive, and solemnly innocuous farce" (*O Dia*, December 24, 1927). Lourenço Filho, one of the most active ICNE participants, differently to the *O Dia* newspaper, was positive about the results of the ICNE. When asked by the *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper, soon after the event, about there having been theses that were unrelated to the Conference, he replied as follows:

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4 The Conference brought together participants from the following Brazilian states: Alagoas, Amazonas, Bahia, Ceará, Federal District (Rio de Janeiro), Espírito Santo, Goiás, Maranhão, Mato Grosso, Pará, Paraná, Pernambuco, Piauí, Rio Grande do Norte, Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and São Paulo.

unrelated, no, but some of them seemed dispersive. Fortunately, the principle was soon established that papers presented on purely scientific matters would not be discussed. The Conference was not held for that purpose, but rather to begin to establish certain key points of a national policy on education. (ABE, 1927)

The thematic diversification found in the 113 theses submitted did not prevent, as Lourenço Filho noted, the affirmation of a principle dear to the leaders of ABE, namely: the need to establish guidelines for the formulation of a national policy on education, capable of forming a common cultural amalgam for the country, starting with primary school.

## **PLACES OF ENUNCIATION, ENUNCIATORS AND TARGETS OF THE BRAZILIAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION'S DISCOURSE**

According to Miceli (2001), Alonso (2002) and Vieira (2011), between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1930s, we can see the gradual affirmation on the Brazilian public scene of the intellectual as a political agent. Recognition of this protagonism demanded the production of an identity, mirrored in the image of an elite that distinguished itself from the traditional inherited and financial elites. Although elitism was associated with feelings of pride and distinction, in this group it also generated feelings of responsibility and social mission. When discussing the political behavior of intellectuals in Brazil, Oliveira (1990, p. 187) states that

regardless of their class origins, their university qualifications or specialized training, [intellectuals] kept themselves busy 'thinking' how Brazil could be and proposing ways for national salvation. By working to build collective consciousness, intellectuals considered themselves imbued with a mission and sought to disseminate their proposals by mediating national aspirations and government policies.

This feeling of mission led to the political engagement of intellectuals, starting with their occupation of multiple and valued institutional places of enunciation, among which we highlight: the press, the State (Legislative, Executive and Judiciary branches), high schools and teacher training schools, colleges and universities, the parliament and cultural and scientific associations. In this sense, the creation of the ABE is an example of these new pulpits created to echo the voice of the intelligentsia that, based on a reformist rhetoric, engendered the discourse of modernity and modernization of the country, which had in the theme of the formation of the people one of its Archimedean points.

The themes discussed at the ABE and at the CNEs reflected, to a great extent, demands on the State, since the ABE members saw the results of the Conferences as the basis for public policies on education. In a statement made to the press, Lourenço Filho provides evidence of this view:

the National Educational Conferences should not and cannot be congresses of a technical or scientific nature. What they should be are centers for studying a national policy on educational matters. They should be moved by a deep social intention, because only this intention explains and recommends them in order to gain the support and confidence of governments. (ABE, 1929)

Speaking from the ABE pulpit, the intellectuals criticized the lack of a national policy for education capable of standardizing the processes of formation, thus calling for the intervention of public authorities to remedy this lack. The State, and especially the Executive branch, became the intellectuals' privileged interlocutor, since they shared the belief about the civilizing role of the



State that, as the political and administrative agent, was considered the only instrument capable of producing, on a national level and in a short period of time, the intended intellectual and moral reform of the Brazilian population. In line with this appeal made by intellectuals in relation to the State, we can also see the permanent action of the State and its leading groups to support and fund the ABE and thus keep it under the protection of its political projects.

The privileged interlocutor was also the object of dispute, either from the perspective of occupying strategic positions in the State apparatus and/or for influencing the formulation of public policies. In this period, the demand for increased access to schooling in Brazilian society, coming from the most varied social strata, led the State and the political groups vying for power in Brazilian society to co-opt important intellectuals to manage projects, institutions and reforms in public policies on education. We can mention as examples of this movement the following education reforms: São Paulo, led by Sampaio Dória (1920); Federal District, led by Carneiro Leão and Fernando de Azevedo (1922 and 1928); Bahia (1924) and Minas Gerais (1927), led by Anísio Teixeira and Francisco Campos, respectively. The reforms in Ceará (1922), Pernambuco (1928) and Paraná (1920), led by Lourenço Filho, Carneiro Leão, César Prieto Matinez and Lysímaco Ferreira da Costa, were expressions of this same process in states with less political weight in that period. The public administrators responsible for the management of these policies had in common the fact that they had all been leaders of the ABE and/or frequent visitors to its events.

The ABE and its Conferences focused on political intervention, so that, when analyzing its creation, Carvalho pointed out that “it was from the thwarted attempt to organize the *Acção Nacional* political party that the Brazilian Education Association was born” (Carvalho, 1998, p. 54). This interpretation is supported by the words of Lourenço Filho, the then president of the ABE, in the context of the VII CNE:

A little more than ten years ago, concerned about the social and political events happening in the country, some men of good will got together, having at their head the singular figure of Heitor Lyra da Silva; and between the idea of organizing a new political party and that of founding an association in favor of national culture, they decided to opt for the latter. [...], that program was and is political, in the best and highest sense of the term. Political, in the sense of reviving in all spirits, responsible for the things of Brazil, their faith in the things of education; and political, in the sense of enlightening public opinion concerning the problems of national organization, by means of cultural organization. (ABE, 1935)

On the part of the State there was no lack of invitations for the ABE to intervene in the political scene, as can be seen on the occasion of the IV CNE, when Getúlio Vargas and Francisco Campos, President of the Republic and Minister of Education respectively, in their speeches at the event opening ceremony, asked the conference-goers to provide the government with the “‘blessed formula’, the ‘concept of education’ of the new educational policy” (Carvalho, 1998, p. 380). Intellectuals holding management positions in the Executive branch, both at the federal and state levels, were constant throughout the period, so that we agree with Valério’s argument that

the National Education Conferences were a space structured by ABE intellectuals who, counting on an ABE chapter in each state, aimed to disseminate the policies devised by the ABE and occupy governmental space. Such occupation would enable the implementation of a national education policy and a broad program of social action in the country. For this, they needed the State to fund and support the decisions taken there, in a relationship convenient for the government, which, in turn, sought the support of the various sectors of civil society to implement its policy. (Valério, 2013, p. 82)

## REFERENTS AND STRATEGIC RHETORIC OF THE BRAZILIAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION'S DISCOURSE

As we have already mentioned, the main objective of the ABE was to discuss and propose alternatives to national problems that, according to the belief of the time, could be solved by educational work. Among these problems the leading group within the ABE highlighted the lack of national identity and consciousness. For the intellectuals engaged in the *educational cause*, Brazil was a territory occupied by millions of inhabitants, but that did not constitute itself as a nation. The extent of the territory, the diversity of races, cultures, customs and the new European migratory inflow were factors listed as causes of this state of cultural and political fragmentation. According to the interpretation of the ABE intellectuals, the country lacked a people with clear national consciousness and common purposes. In this sense, national unity was presented as the main objective to be achieved by educational action, so that the terms uniformization, homogenization, standardization were used in different lines of argumentation and in various topics analyzed in the theses they presented at the ICNE.

In this scenario, the people's lack of instruction was pointed out as one of the causes of the country's mismatch in relation to the concert of modern nations. The positions of conference-goer Sebastião Paraná reveal this representation: "it is due to lack of instruction that we have not been able to advance in the economic domain, remaining in a situation of inferiority" (ABE, 1935, n. 59). In the same thesis he stated: "Instruction of the people is a matter of life and death for modern societies" (ABE, 1935, n. 59). The illiteracy rate figured as the main evidence of the people's ignorance and, thus, was regularly referred to in political and educational discourses throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the language game that was played it is possible to perceive the growing tendency to use statistics as an argument of authority that, based on the effect of truth of numbers, built justifications for interventions on the ways of acting, thinking and feeling of the population. Many theses used statistics to create an impressionistic picture of the so-called national backwardness or, from another focus of interest, to show the existence of exceptions or islands of excellence in the context of national education. The high rates of illiteracy were not presented as resulting from the incompetence of the political elite in providing popular education, but rather as an expression of the resistance of these layers of the population to understanding the roles of school and education in the development of Brazilian society. Some theses categorically stated that "parents are not able to understand what advantages [instruction] will bring for the future. [...] And what can the illiterate father say about the teacher's degree of competence with regard to sending his child to school?" (ABE, 1935, n. 24).

The propositions about the ignorance of students and the inaptitude of parents contributed to the affirmation of the main proposal under debate: the uniformization and compulsory nature of primary education throughout the national territory.<sup>5</sup> Several theses dealt with these aspects and in them we notice a convergence around the need for the diffusion of primary education. However, the argument, usually presented by State authorities, of the lack of economic, physical and human resources necessary for the immediate universalization of primary education, imposed the search for measures capable of alleviating or overcoming the shortage of education in the country. Among these, we highlight: the proposal that teachers should leave large cities and go to the countryside,

<sup>5</sup> The first law that dealt with primary schooling in Brazil was the Imperial Decree of October 15, 1827, the purpose of which was to "Order the creation of primary schools in all the most populous towns, villages and places in the Empire". Nevertheless, at the 1927 ICNE, one hundred years after this law, Brazil was still a long way from providing the population with universal basic schooling.

in order to attend to the needs of the largest possible number of students; the thesis that female primary school teachers should remain celibate, since, as they were in charge of the education of students, they could not also take on the responsibility of rearing offspring; the proposal, also linked to the gender dimension, of a pedagogical service that would oblige women to render service to the motherland by teaching children to read and write, following the example of what happened to men in relation to military service; besides the thesis, also of military inspiration, of school conscription that would oblige families to enlist children of a certain age at school to be taught to read and write for a year (ABE, 1935).

In this context, education was not characterized as a right, but rather as an obligation of families that the State would oversee, while “parents would not interfere in this important work. They would have no right to choose! They would only have the duty to encourage and respect this government action” (ABE, 1935, n. 27). The positiveness inherent in the idea of primary education universalization does not hide the authoritarian tone of the ABE discourse and the disqualifying representations of the lower classes. The intellectual elite working in the ABE was prodigal in its use of the verb to oblige, the adjective obligatory and the noun obligatoriness.

The rhetoric of action against the ignorance of the people found no declared enemies and, thus, justified all kinds of commanding postures towards the population. In this sense, the right to education was transfigured into the rhetoric of compulsory education that, far from producing quick and lasting effects in terms of widening access to public schools, reaffirmed images of the people’s vice and the intellectual elites’ virtue. In this key to interpreting the elite in relation to the people, apart from the people’s ignorance in the mastery of reading, writing and arithmetic, the elite added their belief in the people’s moral decadence.

The tone of catastrophe present in this discourse signaled the imminence of national disintegration and dissolution of the bonds of social coexistence and, thus, imposed the sense of urgency in relation to measures capable of moralizing the population. In the discussions about morality and immorality we can explicitly see the ambivalence of the educational discourse, since, while on the level of fighting ignorance, science and new pedagogies were celebrated and proclaimed as signs of modernity, on the moral level, changes and ruptures in relation to tradition and customs met great resistance. In the discussion of morality the public and private dimensions of social life were intertwined, to the extent that public morality, associated with the formation of civic spirit, and the private morality of the individual, related to social behavior, were treated as inseparable aspects.

In other terms, respect for public order, for political and legal hierarchies, as well as assent to paternal authority, to women’s subservience, and to strict sexual morality were closely related. The prototype of the moral man was the republican citizen who professed the Catholic faith and who strictly controlled his body and his desires. The strong presence of Catholic ideology among the conference-goers was possible due to a reorientation of the Church, during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in order to overcome the antagonism between Catholicism and republicanism, which marked the early days of the Republic. Besides this, the anticlerical and/or materialist groups and movements, present in the Brazilian intellectual scenario of the period, were not able to spread moral principles and values capable of shaking the strong presence of the Catholic worldview, especially among the lower classes.

Thus, we can see a certain accommodation between Catholicism and republicanism, present in the thesis that dealt with religious education in public schools. Although the argument provoked tensions and confrontations between Catholic militants, the anticlerical and supporters of the secular State, the issue of religious education ended up being absorbed in the ABE guidelines. At the ICNE, this issue underwent voting in the plenary session and, with 117 votes in favor and 86 against,

the following wording was approved: “that the teaching of morals, in all educational institutes in the country, be based on the religious notion, respect for the beliefs of others, and solidarity in all work toward national progress” (ABE, 1927).

The terms were clear: the teaching of morals would be based on the religious notion which, in this context, represented a form of euphemism of a Catholic education. This proposal was largely justified by the assertion that secular education was exclusively focused on scientific aspects, lacking a solid moral reference that would guarantee, beyond instruction, the integral education of the individual. The verbs to instruct and to educate represented, in the language game played, different meanings, which contrasted formation focused exclusively on the intellect and formation that educated, at one and the same time, the intellect, the devout soul of the individual and the civic consciousness of the republican citizen. This is what Roberto de Almeida Cunha, the Minas Gerais representative, stated at the ICNE: “We have pyrrhonicly clung to the secularism of primary education, virtually leading our children into dispersive and denationalizing religious indifferentism” (ABE, 1935, n. 69). We can infer from this statement the clear relationship between the Catholic faith and the feeling of nationality, because in the church’s rhetoric Catholicism, due to its centuries-old missionary tradition in the Brazilian territory, represented the basis of national consciousness and identity.

The theses that defended the secular orientation of public schools did not directly question the Catholic religious orientation. However, they defended, in the name of freedom of thought, that religious education should be provided by the family, in accordance with its religion. On the other hand, the theses that considered religious education to be the best option for moral orientation countered by stating that families were incapable of providing a solid religious and moral education, since they lacked adequate education to do so. These disputes over the moral orientation of the population were based on the belief that instruction of the intellect would not, in itself, produce the formation of a national consciousness. This process depended on education of the soul, which was not associated with reason, but rather with sensibility and emotion.

In this sense, we can affirm that, according to the discourse of the ABE intellectuals, one of the main traits of immorality present in Brazilian society was the decline of the Catholic worldview. This decline, according to the Church’s discourse at the time, was driven by the following reasons: the presence of a syncretic interpretation of Catholicism among the lower classes; the individualistic and materialistic tendency in economic life, proper to the logic of capitalism; the emergence of profane cults and sects; and the growing tendency among the intellectual elite to adhere to materialism and agnosticism.

Another aspect indicated as being of great relevance among the principal national problems was that of hygiene, since we found a large number of theses that emphasized the terrible Brazilian sanitary conditions and, above all, the need for hygiene and eugenic education in public and private schools. Of the eight ICNE Thematic Commissions, one dealt exclusively with hygiene education. The sanitary, hygienic and eugenic issues were associated with the absence of collective ideals of national unity and the lack of moral formation.

Urbanization, resulting from the advent of modernization of Brazilian society, contributed to the visibility of the sanitary issue, while the structural limits of the main cities of the country and accelerated growth of the urban population led to proliferation of diseases and visibility of poverty and misery. In this ambience, physicians, with their knowledge and practices related to healing, symbolized the possibility of overcoming social infirmity, while, as men of science, they were the educators par excellence with regard to hygiene habits and social conducts considered morally adequate. The topics of sexuality, alcohol consumption, diseases, nutrition, body building

and cleanliness were on the agenda and, in the 1920s, justified rigid monitoring of social discipline, giving the State power to intervene, whether through the action of organs linked to public health and education, or those linked to police repression. Carvalho (1998) points to the sanitary issue, at this period in time, as

a rhetorical resource of great sensitizing efficiency: the negative and somewhat abstract image of the absence of education is advantageously replaced by the concretizing image of disease that induces the listener's imagination to visualize, in the analogous horror of cancer or physical degeneration, the evils of the country's educational situation. (p. 124)

In this way,

condensing the evils of Brazil in the metaphor of a sick and indolent Brazilian and the hopes of eradicating these evils in the action of an elite endowed with demiurgic powers, the civic discourse of the ABE [functioned as] a prophylactic intervention raising the sanitary issue as a metaphor of the national situation and the work of education as a means of achieving sanitation. (p. 124)

The medical-sanitary lexicon, associated with the significant presence of physicians among the ABE intellectuals, composed the language game played at the ICNE. Medical discourse, understood as a correlate of scientific discourse, was not presented in the public debate only as a means of disease prevention or health promotion. The public figure of the physician became an expression of authority capable of dealing with the anomalies that produced the malfunctioning of the social organism. Thus, in the same way that the right to education was transfigured in the rhetoric of compulsory education, the right of the population to health and well-being was transfigured in devices to control the way of life of the lower classes. The discussion about health and disease, far from generating effective results in terms of the improvement of living conditions in Brazilian cities, reaffirmed the image of the population as being sick, dependent on the sanitation action of physicians engaged in the educational field.

In short, the themes gathered together in the triad of ignorance, immorality and disease represented the main referents or objects of the rhetoric of national backwardness. This rhetoric conferred persuasive power to the ABE discourse and, by extension, affirmed the political protagonism of the intellectuals associated with the ABE. The language game employed an argumentative strategy based on the rhetorical resources of *contrast*, *analogy*, *modulation* and *causality*.

The use of contrasting meanings can be perceived in the combination of antinomic terms in the structuring of the ABE discourse, such as life and death, health and disease, civilization and barbarism, knowledge and ignorance, morality and indecency, industriousness and indolence, aptitude and inaptitude, patriotism and civic indifference. In this argumentative context, the first terms of these pairs indicated the possibilities opened by educational modernity, while the second represented the Brazilian reality that needed to be transformed. Koselleck (2006) refers to these conceptual pairs which are widely mobilized in public conversation as being antithetic-asymmetric. What characterizes these conceptual pairs "is that they determine a position following criteria such that the resulting adversary position can only be rejected. Therein lies their political efficacy" (Koselleck, 2006, p. 195). In other terms, for its enunciators the first term of the pair has a positive meaning, while the second is markedly negative.<sup>6</sup>

6 Koselleck's Problematization focuses on the terms Hellenistic-Barbarian, Christian-Pagan, man-non-man, and superman versus underdog (Koselleck, 2006, p. 193).

Two examples key to understanding the use of antithetic-asymmetric concepts in the discourse used at the ICNE are: the unity-disaggregation pair, mobilized in the arguments about the formation of the nation, national consciousness and national identity; or, moreover, the instruction-ignorance pair, regularly present in the debates about the expansion of schooling or, in a particular way, in the discussion about primary education as an obligation. The use of these binary concepts in public conversation is typical of the production of political rhetoric, which aims at the exclusion, impugnation, silencing and defeat of the adversary. A position is ascribed to the adversary, identified as the representation of the second term of the pair, which is impossible to take on, since to defend the disintegration of the country or the ignorance of the people was not a position that could be sustained in the ongoing disputes of the period.

In the study of the ICNE conducted by Vieira and Faria (2019), other antithetic-asymmetric concept pairs were identified, also including their correlated terms, which functioned rhetorically to reinforce certain meanings, either the positiveness of the first term in the pair or the negativeness of the second (Chart 2).

In a derived rhetorical strategy, the use of analogy produced comparisons between aspects, selected on a one-off basis and opportunely decontextualized, of the Brazilian, European, and North American realities. This acted to emphatically contrast the vices and infirmities of the people and the country in relation to the virtues of cultures and nations considered civilized and modern. In this rhetorical game, the modulation of voices played a fundamental role, while the tones of catastrophism, fatalism and severity can be felt in the multiple contexts of enunciation, providing the senses of urgency, priority and necessity. And, finally, the logical effect of the argument based on causal relations that associated: lack of hygiene with disease, lack of education with ignorance, lack of patriotism with civic indifference, lack of religiosity with immorality, and all these lacking items added up to the cultural and political breakdown of the nation.

The combination between the referents of discourse (national identity and consciousness), the places of enunciation (ABE and ICNE), the authority of the enunciators (intellectuals), and the rhetorical strategy (contrast, modulation, analogy, and causality) conferred great power of persuasion on the educational discourse, resulting in the rise of the ABE intelligentsia to important positions in public administration, parliament, higher education and civil society. Holding these positions resulted in political power and social prestige.

## THE COMPLEX LANGUAGE USED IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BRAZILIAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION'S DISCOURSE

The analysis of the educational discourse undertaken so far in this text has provided evidence and interpretations about the enunciators, the targets, the places of enunciation, the rhetorical strategies and the objects or referents of the ABE discourse. As such, we will now consider the language game they played, based on the notion of *complex language* as put forward by Pocock and mentioned in the introduction of this study.

For this operation, we initially analyzed the lexical composition of the discourse used at the ICNE. To this end, we sought to identify the vocabulary used and, above all, which words took on the functions of normative concepts, implying the formation of the main meanings in dispute in the language game played. Based on the examination of more than 280,000 words in the 113 theses presented, we gradually identified a limited set of words that, although they were not the most frequently enunciated, formed the main semantic field of this discourse.

Figure 1 illustrates the representativeness of each word, based on its frequency within the *documentary corpus* analyzed. The words written with larger fonts and at the center of the figure are the ones that occurred most. Presenting in graphic form the language that was used also allows us to analyze the dispersion, concentration and degree of proximity between the different terms

**Chart 2 – Antithetic-asymmetric concepts, present in the language used in the First National Education Conference debates.**

<b>Groups of correlated concepts</b>	<b>Groups of correlated antithetic-asymmetric concepts</b>
National Unity National Integration National Character National Consciousness National Territory Nation State	Disaggregation Separatism Anarchism Division Fragmentation Dissolution Ruin
Civilization Culture Instruction Education	Barbarity Ignorance Illiteracy Savagery
Laboriousness	Indolence
Soberness	Drunkenness
Discipline Order Obedience Responsibility	Disorder Irresponsibility Unruliness
Health Hygiene Eugenia Sanitation Cleanliness Prophylaxis Childcare	Disease Degeneration Pathology Disorder Worm infestation Syphilis Alcoholism
Modern Modernity Modernization Progress Development	Traditional Backward Archaic Antiquated Anachronistic Obsolete
Race People	Half-breed Bumpkin Colonist Yokel Immigrant
Urban City	Rural Backcountry
True Rational Method Knowledge Science	False Irrational Improvisation Ignorance Superstition
Patriotism Civism	Unpatriotic

Source: ICNE Theses, box prepared by Vieira and Faria (2019, p. 108).







It is important to note that the lexicon used to produce this discourse was not originally produced within the educational field, but rather was appropriated from other language games.

At the center of Figure 3, the national issue is surrounded by expressions such as: hygiene, vice, consciousness, progress, religion, sacred, among others that connote meanings associated with the medical-sanitary, civic-nationalist and religious discourses. The combination of these words, in circulation in other social spaces, produced a particular way of talking about education. This language game reflected both the space of experience and the horizon of expectation of the intellectuals of the period. In other words, it functioned as a linguistic form and material capable of expressing both the interpretation of the reality of national education and the desires to transform educational legislation, pedagogical methods and formation processes.

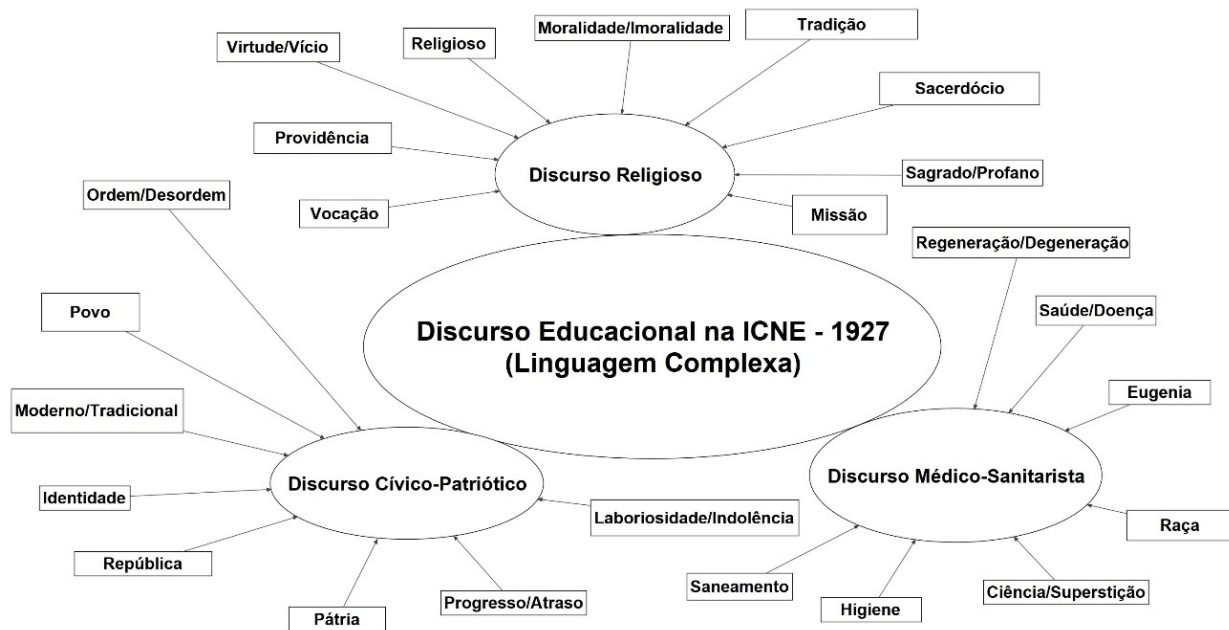
**Figure 3 – Words used in the theses presented at the First National Education Conference with origins in the medical-sanitary, civic-nationalist, and religious discourses.**



Source: prepared by the author, using IRaMuTeQ software.

Figure 4 illustrates the hypothesis that guides this study about production in the educational discourse, understood as a *complex language*. We found that the structuring of the ABE discourse occurred through the combination of terms from other language games, particularly those played in the contexts of medical-sanitary, religious and civic-nationalist discourses. Nevertheless, these terms from different discursive matrices, when absorbed into the educational discourse, gained new meanings and uses specific to the language game shared in the process of formation of the educational field in Brazil.

**Figure 4 – Explanatory diagram of the *complex language* that characterized the language game at the First National Education Conference.**



Source: prepared by the author, using the Visual Understanding Environment (VUE) tool.

One of the explanations for this phenomenon lies in the characterization, in the period covered by this study, of the debate around education as a national issue, strategic for the State and for society. Thus, the language game played was not restricted to the vocabulary of the so-called education specialists, since it brought together physicians, teachers, politicians, religious people, scientists, in short, a diverse group of linguistic actors, who brought their vocabularies and ways of speaking into the educational debate.

## BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

In this study we were able to identify the ABE and the ICNE as privileged pulpits for projecting the authority of an intelligentsia authorized to speak about the problems and, above all, about the goals and priorities of national education. In this scenario, the educational congresses fulfilled multiple functions, among which we highlight: to give visibility to the State's actions; to legitimize the intellectuals involved in leading the reforms; to win the consent of teachers, parents, and students to the implementation of the intended changes; and, finally, to affirm the discourse of modernity that associated investments in education with the ideas of progress, development, and social welfare. We have sought to demonstrate, throughout this text, that this discourse represented a movement that, by asserting the importance of culture and education in the country's development process, projected intellectuals as a model of social virtue and, by extension, raised them to the condition of prestigious social agents, especially by the political elite that controlled the State.

The main intention of the language game played was to affirm the imperative need for standardization of teaching in the country (methods, curricula, teacher training and educational legislation), aiming at the creation of a national education system. We also problematized the authoritarian character of the ABE discourse, based on representations of the Brazilian people as indolent, immoral, unwell and ignorant; as well as on the representation of the civilizing role of the intellectual and political elites. In an ambivalent way, this discourse revealed the intellectuals' engagement and commitment to the country's problems, in such a way that, by becoming interested in the education of the people, the intellectuals made evident historical demands put forward by the lower classes and organized social movements. Demands for more schools and quality education became visible in the public debate, expanding the possibilities of meeting these goals. Therefore, understanding the ambivalence of this discourse makes it possible to avoid Manichean interpretations that either sacralize or satanize the public behavior of Brazilian intellectuals between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the view of Clarice Nunes (2000), the Brazilian intellectual elite lived an intense "problem of coexistence with contradiction, indetermination, uncertainties, conceptions and practices at times closer to democratization, at times closer to authoritarian positions" (p. 395).

We also demonstrated that the educational discourse, enunciated at this event and disseminated by the ABE, can be understood as a *complex language*. The appropriation of concepts from the medical-sanitary, civic-nationalist and religious discourses reveals the transgression of linguistic, social, disciplinary and institutional boundaries. The complexity of this discourse was due to the diversity of the linguistic actors who used it, allowing the hypothesis that, in the context of the 1920s, the theme of education represented a crucial issue for the State, for the political and intellectual elites and, above all, for the population that saw in education and in schools a means of social mobility and ascension.

We also found that the movement of concepts between these boundaries resulted in new uses, re-significations and, consequently, in adherence to and accumulation of new semantic layers. In this sense, the language game played at the ICNE aimed at the internalization of certain meanings, such as: *identity*, based on civism and the idea of national culture; *laboriousness*, based on the close harmony between culture and the world of work; *religiosity*, conceived as a mobilizing principle of faith and devotion to causes; and *good health*, conceived as cleanliness and control of the body (Vieira, 2007).

The discourse on education used at the ICNE was produced in the context of an intense symbolic dispute, which allows us to assume the association of this discourse with possible political courses of action in that scenario. In the terms proposed by linguistic contextualism, words do not function only for the description of reality (illocution), they are acts (perlocutions), or to use the expression popularized by John Searle, *speech acts*. Thus, even though we cannot establish a causal relationship between discourse and social and educational practices, between words and actions, we can adopt the hypothesis that: changes in language are indicative of changes in practices. As Skinner (1999, p. 86) stated: "that which it is possible to do in politics is generally limited by that which it is possible to legitimize. What one can hope to legitimize, however, depends on what course of action one can plausibly achieve under existing normative principles". In a similar direction, Pocock states that "the historian is no doubt perfectly aware that things happen to human beings before they are verbalized, though not before they possess the means of verbalizing them" (2003, p. 56).

Within this reading key, the study of language is not restricted to analysis of discourse, to ways of talking about finished topics, since access to language used in public conversation allows

us to trace hypotheses about ongoing lines of action. According to Vieira (2017b), a condition necessary for studying educational practices, especially those occurring in recent or remote historical times, is understanding the language game played, considering the vocabulary current in each context, as well as the terms that, within this game, take on contours of normative concepts. In other words, the variations in the ways of talking about education at the ICNE—oscillating between terms coming from the religious, medical-sanitary and civic-nationalist discourses—are indications of changes in the perception of education and, especially, of its policies and practices.

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