

# Pedagogical artifacts and transnational flows: an economic history of education\*

Renata Brião de Castro  
School of Education  
University of São Paulo (Brazil)  
recastro@usp.br

**ABSTRACT:** The book *História econômica da escola: Uma abordagem antropológica em circuito transnacional (1870-1910)*, by Diana Vidal and Wiara Alcântara, explores the economic dimension of school material culture. It examines the transnational circulation of pedagogical artifacts, such as books and wall paintings, between 1870 and 1910. Using an interdisciplinary approach – economic history, material anthropology, and transnational history – the authors analyze the impact of monopolies and local markets on school practices and educational policies, integrating school objects into broader cultural and economic flows.

**EET/TEE KEYWORDS:** School material culture; Economic history of education; Transnational circulation; Anthropology of education; XIX-XX Centuries.

*História econômica da escola: Uma abordagem antropológica em circuito transnacional (1870-1910)* [*Economic history of the school: An anthropological approach in a transnational circuit (1870-1910)*] is a work resulting from the research of Diana Gonçalves Vidal and Wiara Rosa Alcântara, published by the publisher of the State University of São Paulo (Unesp), Brazil, in the year 2024, the volume is part of the *Dialogues in History of Education*, Collection of the *Brazilian Society of History of Education* [*Sociedade Brasileira de História da Educação*]<sup>1</sup>. The book addresses a perspective still little explored in the history of education: the economic dimension of school material culture. By investigating the interconnections between pedagogical artifacts and economic processes, the work expands the traditional scope of analy-

\* This article is part of a research project that seeks to identify, catalogue and analyze the Italian textbooks that circulated in Italian schools in the South American context of the countries of Brazil and Argentina during the 20 years of fascist rule. This research was supported by The São Paulo research foundation (*Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo – FAPESP* n. 2023/16884-7 and FAPESP n. 2022/15183-2).

<sup>1</sup> SBHE website: <<https://sbhe.org.br/>> (last access: 13.03.2025).

sis, highlighting how school materiality is intrinsically linked to the dynamics of production, circulation and consumption in local and transnational contexts. Diana Vidal is a senior professor at the University of São Paulo (USP), with extensive experience in the history of education and school material culture, Wiara Alcântara is a professor at the Federal University of ABC Paulista (UFABC), dedicating her research to the study of school material culture. Together, their contributions have significantly expanded the theoretical and methodological horizons in the field of the history of education on the theme that involves the circulation of objects, ideas and subjects. Thus, this book is the result of 29 years of research, in 1995 the project began: *The school in its materiality: strategies and tactics (Distrito Federal, 1927-1930)*<sup>2</sup>, currently this field of research continues with the thematic project: *Knowledge and practices in borders: for a transnational history of education (1810-...)*<sup>3</sup>, both projects led by Professor Diana Vidal and with funding from the São Paulo Research Foundation (*Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo* – FAPESP), Brazil.

Rosa Fátima de Souza Chaloba, full professor at the University of the State of São Paulo (Unesp), when prefacing the work, summarizes its meaning in the following paragraph:

It is, at least, curious the inflection that occurred in the trajectory of research on material culture attested in this book by Diana and Wiara. From the internalist exploration of school culture, but concerned with the pedagogical and political meanings of objects, to the understanding of the transnational circuit of school artifacts, there is certainly a change of perspective and an in-depth reflection on the knowledge already accumulated. We find in the book another way to inquire into school culture by inserting it into the economic dimension of society in contexts exogenous to school [...]<sup>4</sup>.

The highlighted excerpt of the preface emphasizes the change of perspective in the research on school material culture presented by Vidal and Alcântara. The transition from internalist exploration to an expanded analysis, which inserts objects into the transnational and economic circuit of society, is central to understanding the theoretical and methodological impact of the work. In this sense, the book highlights two essential aspects: by challenging the internalist analysis, the authors suggest a new methodological horizon, in which school objects are no longer understood only as elements of pedagogical practice and are studied as products of transnational economic processes. In addition, the insertion of school culture in contexts exogenous

<sup>2</sup> Research project entitled *A escola na sua materialidade: estratégias e táticas (Distrito Federal, 1927-1930)*.

<sup>3</sup> Research project entitled *Saberes e práticas em fronteiras: por uma história transnacional da educação (1810-...)*.

<sup>4</sup> R. Chaloba, *Prefácio*, in D. Vidal, W. Alcântara, *História econômica da escola: Uma abordagem antropológica em circuito transnacional (1870-1910)*, São Paulo, UNESP, 2024, p. 8.

to the school expands the possibilities of investigation, emphasizing the role of economic and cultural exchanges in school materiality. The book suggests that school culture cannot be fully understood without its insertion into the broader flow of economic and social exchanges, especially in contexts outside the school walls. Thus, the study is not limited to definitive conclusions, but invites researchers to continue investigating and expanding the theoretical and methodological horizons. Another point highlighted by Chaloba (2024) refers to the transnational history of education, which, according to her, has gained prominence in academic research. However, operationalizing this approach in a precise and skillful way still represents a challenge, which reinforces the importance and contribution of this book to the field<sup>5</sup>. The sources analyzed throughout the book constitute one of the main differentials of Vidal and Alcântara's research. The authors mobilize a wide variety of primary registrations, encompassing institutional archives, trade catalogs, patent registrations, statistical reports, and government documentation. This wide range of materials enables the detailed reconstruction of the relationships between the circulation of school artifacts, economic dynamics and educational processes, offering an integrated and comprehensive view of the theme. It is highlighted the use of documents that point out the material exchanges between countries in Europe and South America, as well as local sources, which enrich the analysis by connecting regional and global contexts, consolidating a transnational perspective, for the authors: «[...] From the second half of the nineteenth century, the school became increasingly a transnational phenomenon, with manifestations, dynamics and organizations peculiar to its local realities [...]»<sup>6</sup>.

Regarding the methodology adopted, the authors combine economic history with the anthropology of education, using material culture as a central analytical lens. The transnational approach allows connecting different geographical contexts and exploring material and cultural exchanges, without losing sight of local particularities, which makes it possible to analyze not only the circulation of school objects, but also their economic, pedagogical and cultural implications. Also, the methodology articulates empirical data with a theoretical basis, which includes references such as material anthropology, transnational history, cultural history, among others. The game of scales assumes a central function, shifting the focus between transnational and local perspectives.

In terms of originality, the proposal to situate the economic development of schools in the transnational context dialogues with themes still little explored in educational research. These reflections are organized into eight chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion, followed by bibliographic references and a specific section dedicated to the archives and sources consulted.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

This division between source and bibliography stands out, which not only facilitates the work of other researchers interested in deepening the investigation, but highlights the diversity used by the authors. They clarify that the chapters are derived from articles previously published in English, having been reformulated and expanded to compose the book. In addition, they point out that chapter six, the introduction and the conclusion are unpublished texts, prepared specifically for this publication. Each of the eight chapters of the book concludes with final comments, in which the authors resume and discuss the main points addressed throughout the chapter, reinforcing the connections between the themes presented and their implications for the field of the history of education.

Chapter one, *Da cultura material escolar à história econômica da escola* [*From material school culture to the economic history of the school*], discusses the role of material culture in the formation of the modern school, highlighting how school objects and everyday practices reflect and influence the educational economy. The approach is detailed, with an analysis of the economic implications of school material culture, which is introduced in the chapter as an analytical lens to investigate the economic history of school institutions and is perceived as a constitutive and active element in the history of education. Four strands of study on school materiality are discussed, namely: museological or educational heritage; technological or innovation; librarian or school textbooks and, finally, the sociocorporal. The discussion proposed by the authors is enriched by the transdisciplinary approach, which articulates cultural history, material anthropology and economic history. Vidal and Alcântara explore the interdependence between the physical space of the school and the associated economic practices, demonstrating how the school environment is simultaneously a pedagogical space and a reflection of broader economic and social transformations. Besides, the authors problematize the transnational circularity of school objects, showing that pedagogical materials, school furniture and manuals were not static, but products that moved between countries, crossing geographical and cultural borders. Vidal and Alcântara argue that school material culture should be understood as part of a broader economic system, in which educational artifacts act as mediators of the relationships between teaching, technology and the economy. The chapter also cites initiatives of scientific societies of History of Education and some documentation centers that preserve schoolbooks. In addition, studies by Italian researchers that address the economic dimension of the mass school are mentioned, contributing to a more in-depth analysis of the theme.

Chapter two, *Sobre marcos temporais e categorias* [*On time frames and categories*], explores the categories of statistics and comparative education, pointing out how educational data has shaped public policies in the European and Latin American context. Vidal and Alcântara discuss how data collection and comparison between education systems influenced the formulation

of public policies between 1870 and 1910, mainly in the European and South American context. The discussion focuses on cultural mediators and the role of statistics as a tool for the economic development of schools. The authors' analysis shows that the advancement of educational statistics enabled a more systematic view of school systems, allowing the identification of gaps, investment planning and the formulation of public policies. Vidal and Alcântara show how educational data came to be used not only as technical tools, but also as instruments of power, guiding political and economic interventions in different national contexts. In addition, comparative education has emerged as a strategic practice for understanding and evaluating the performance of school institutions on an international scale. At the beginning of the chapter, the authors discuss the research sources that support their analysis, highlighting the diversity and limitations of the available material, drawing attention to the access difficulties faced, especially in the Latin American context, in which archives are often incomplete or poorly preserved. Vidal and Alcântara reveal that, although statistics may seem objective, they are socially constructed and carry the political and economic intentions of their time. By examining the circulation of these data in the European and South American context, the authors demonstrate how education has become a field of dispute and negotiation between different social and political actors.

Chapters one and two of the book reviewed have a predominantly theoretical and methodological character, while, from the third chapter, analyzes based on a diverse set of sources begin, which include historical documents, pedagogical materials and institutional records. Throughout the book, theory and empiricism are integrated in an articulated way, allowing conceptual reflections to be supported by analyzes based on a rich and diverse set of historical sources.

Next, chapter three, *Artefatos escolares – Os quadros Parietais da Maison Deyrolle* [School artifacts – The Parietal paintings from Maison Deyrolle], focuses on the parietal paintings from Maison Deyrolle, France, which played an important role in the teaching of natural sciences in several countries. The authors highlight the role of the Brazilian School Museum, in this case it, the Museum, assumed the format of parietal paintings to circulate in school spaces. They examine the transnational circulation of these paintings as educational artifacts between Europe and Latin America, highlighting how pedagogical materials influence teaching methods and the standardization of pedagogical practices. The parietal paintings of the Maison Deyrolle were recognized for their visual quality and for addressing detailed and accessible scientific content, such as botany, zoology, anatomy and ecology. Its diffusion was driven by the expansion of modern educational systems and the growing importance of science education in the school curriculum, as well as the development of a transnational pedagogical industry. The parietal paintings were translated from French to Portuguese, according to Vidal and Alcântara, more

than a translation, it was a cultural translation<sup>7</sup>, as the elements were changed and reorganized for use in the Brazilian context. From this perspective, the chapter inserts pedagogical artifacts into a transnational circuit, showing that school objects are carriers of power relations, modernization and standardization, fundamental for understanding the economic and cultural history of education. Thus, the chapter focuses on the circulation of people, ideas and artifacts, the authors outline that in addition to an adaptation of the materials, what occurred was a cultural hybridization, an idea that permeates the entire book.

Chapter four, *Comércio local e consumo escolar – A Casa Lebre* [Local Commerce and School Consumption – Casa Lebre], examines the role of Casa Lebre as a supplier of materials to schools in São Paulo. The chapter provides a detailed overview of local consumption and commerce networks. The analysis proposed by the authors goes beyond the description of commercial activities, exploring the complexity of local consumption networks that were established around São Paulo school education. Casa Lebre acted not only as a supplier of basic school materials but also as an intermediary between industrial production and educational institutions. This strategic role highlights the articulation between the local market and educational demands, connecting the regional economy to the expansion of formal education in Brazil. The authors point out that the growth of the Normal School and the Polytechnic School in São Paulo was accompanied by a greater need for didactic and pedagogical resources, which boosted the performance of local companies such as Casa Lebre. These institutions were not only consumers, but also cultural mediators, responsible for defining the appropriate pedagogical materials and disseminating modern educational practices. Vidal and Alcântara argue that Casa Lebre is a paradigmatic example of how the local market supported and enabled educational demands at a time of school expansion. By articulating producers, consumers and public institutions, it contributed to the dissemination of standardized materials, facilitating the circulation of school objects that enabled the modernization of education. Throughout the chapter, the authors operate with the idea of cultural symbiosis.

In turn, chapter number five, *Indústria escolar transnacional – as carteiras escolares* [Transnational school industry – school desks], discusses the process of industrialization of school furniture, with an emphasis on the development of school desks as symbols of pedagogical transformation and standardization of educational environments. Vidal and Alcântara analyze the trajectory of these desks, highlighting how these changes reflect the broader transformations in the pedagogical and physical organization of schools. The chapter begins with a historical analysis of the period when school furniture was pro-

<sup>7</sup> M. Pallares-Burke, *O Carapuço e outros ensaios de tradução cultural*, São Paulo, Hucitec, 1996; R. Chartier, *A aventura do livro: do leitor ao navegador*, São Paulo, UNESP, 1998.



duced in an artisanal way and on a small scale, adapted to the specificities of local institutions. With the advance of industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, school desks began to be produced on a large scale, which enabled the standardization of educational spaces. This process was driven by the growing demands for modern schools and the need to discipline the school environment. The authors emphasize that the mass manufacturing of the desks was accompanied by a pedagogical discourse that sought to optimize learning and discipline students' behavior. School desks were not just functional objects; they symbolized the standardization and modernization of teaching on a global scale. Vidal and Alcântara explore the transnational circulation of these pieces of furniture and highlight the role of school desks in the physical organization of classrooms, promoting order, discipline and efficiency. In addition, the analysis of the transnational circulation of school desks broadens the understanding of the economic and cultural relationships that shaped educational systems in the period. For the authors, perhaps the school desk is the most exemplary case of the transnational school industry. School furniture catalogues are also covered in the chapter.

Chapter six, *Indústria escolar local – Eduardo Waller & Comp.*, [Local school industry – Eduardo Waller & Comp.], analyzes the national school furniture industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Focused on Eduardo Waller & Comp., one of the first Brazilian companies dedicated to the production of school furniture and pedagogical equipment in the early Twentieth century, the chapter examines its role in the production of school furniture in Brazil, including patented products and relationships with local educational institutions. Vidal and Alcântara address innovation and adaptation to local educational demands as fundamental aspects of Waller's performance. The authors explore the development of this industry by showing how the company contributed to the consolidation of the school material culture in Brazil and to the pedagogical models imported into the Brazilian educational reality. Eduardo Waller & Cia. not only met the demands of Normal Schools and other public institutions, but also played a crucial role in strengthening the local market for educational goods, connecting to the context of modernization of teaching and educational policies implemented during the First Republic (1889-1930)<sup>8</sup>. The chapter seeks to highlight the importance of the national industry in creating its own educational identity, while dialoguing with global pedagogical models.

Chapter seven, *Mercado livreiro – a Biblioteca do povo e das escolas* [Book Market – the Library of the people and schools], discusses the formation of the

<sup>8</sup> The First Republic in Brazil (1889-1930) was marked by an oligarchic political system, known as the governors' policy, and by the predominance of agrarian elites in the states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, consolidating an economic model based on coffee exports and regional political control. For further analysis, see: L. Schwarcz, H. Starling, *Brasil: Uma biografia*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 2015.

educational book market in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing on strategies for the commercialization and circulation of school-books. The term Library, in this case, is not that of a building for the storage of books, but rather that of a collection that was what characterized the Library of the people and schools. The authors analyze it as an innovative initiative aimed at expanding access to books and promoting education as an instrument of social transformation. Created in the context of modernization and expansion of educational systems, it sought to meet the lack of accessible reading materials appropriate to the needs of the school population, especially the less favored classes. Vidal and Alcântara highlight the commercialization strategies used by the Library, which combined affordable prices, wide distribution and content aligned with the pedagogical demands of the time. This model allowed books to reach regions far from large urban centers, expanding the reach of formal education and stimulating the formation of a reading culture among students. The chapter also explores the formation of the educational book market, which was structured from the articulation between publishers, bookstores and school institutions. Vidal and Alcântara analyze how this market has expanded in Brazil. The authors problematize the dual function of the book market: the Democratization of knowledge and the instrument of ideological control.

The eighth and final chapter, *Monopólios e Cartéis – o Syndicat Commercial du Mobilier et du Matériel d'Enseignement* [*Monopolies and Cartels – Syndicat Commercial du Mobilier et du Matériel d'Enseignement*], offers a critical analysis of the role of *Syndicat*, a French monopoly that exerted influence on the school furniture market in Brazil during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Vidal and Alcântara investigate the economic and political dynamics involved, revealing their implications for the price structure, the standardization of products and the offer of educational materials. The analysis brings to light the economic complexities in the provision of school materials and their implications for the educational economy. The authors discuss how *Syndicat Commercial du Mobilier et du Matériel d'Enseignement* consolidated and controlled the supply of school furniture in South American countries, including Brazil. The analysis reveals how *Syndicat*'s influence shaped not only the choices of educational institutions but also the purchasing policies of public administrations, limiting the options available and imposing a price control that hampered local competition. This situation directly affected national industrialization. The authors point out that monopolies cannot be analyzed in isolation, as they are inserted in a network of global political and economic interests. This articulation between education, market and power shows how school materials were, at the same time, tools of modernization and economic domination.

In the work *Economic history of the school: an anthropological approach in a transnational circuit (1970-1910)*, when investigating the relationship be-



tween school material culture and economic dynamics, Vidal and Alcântara challenge the internalist narratives that restrict the study of educational practices to national borders. In the Brazilian context, the work highlights the role of the local market and regional adaptations in the expansion of education, as exemplified by the performance of companies such as Eduardo Waller & Comp. and Casa Lebre. This approach values the economic and cultural specificities of Brazil, offering a detailed analysis of the schooling processes in the country. In a transnational perspective, the book reveals how material exchanges between countries in Europe and America have shaped the modern school, both in economic and pedagogical terms. By investigating the intersections between economic history, anthropology of education and transnational circulation, the book not only broadens the understanding of schooling processes, but also invites new studies.