

[https://doi.org/10.1590/1980531410773\\_en](https://doi.org/10.1590/1980531410773_en)

## YVONNE JEAN: A LOOK AT ESCOLA REGIONAL DE MERITI, RJ, 1948

 Juarez José Tuchinski dos Anjos<sup>I</sup>

 Betânia de Oliveira Laterza Ribeiro<sup>II</sup>

 Translated by: Fernando Effori de Mello<sup>III</sup>

<sup>I</sup> Universidade de Brasília (UnB), Brasília (DF), Brazil; juarezdosanjos@yahoo.com.br

<sup>II</sup> Universidade Federal de Uberlândia (UFU), Uberlândia (MG), Brazil; betania.laterza@gmail.com

<sup>III</sup> Freelancer, São Paulo (SP), Brazil; feffori@gmail.com

### Abstract

Based on the account of a visit by Yvonne Jean, a Belgian-Brazilian journalist, to Escola Regional de Meriti in 1948, this article aims to build an understanding of her narrative on the merits and demerits, successes and failures, innovations and challenges of the educational model adopted at the school, considering the broader context of Brazilian education at that time. Initially, the focus is on the innovative practices of the Meriti school as described and interpreted by Yvonne Jean; later, attention shifts to her critical reflections on the schooling model of the visited school, a private institution run by a proponent of the Escola Nova [New School] movement and which stood out in the state of Rio de Janeiro and the Baixada Fluminense region.

HISTORY OF EDUCATION • ESCOLA REGIONAL DE MERITI • ARMANDA ALBERTO • YVONNE JEAN

## YVONNE JEAN: UM OLHAR SOBRE A ESCOLA REGIONAL DE MERITI, RJ, 1948

### Resumo

Tomando por fonte o relato de uma visita da jornalista belgo-brasileira Yvonne Jean à Escola Regional de Meriti em 1948, o objetivo deste artigo é construir uma compreensão dessa narrativa sobre méritos e deméritos, sucessos e insucessos, inovações e problemas do modelo educacional praticado na escola e tendo em vista os desafios próprios da educação brasileira daqueles tempos. De início, a atenção recai sobre as práticas inovadoras da escola de Meriti conforme a descrição e interpretação de Yvonne Jean; depois, o foco se concentra nas ponderações críticas dela sobre o modelo de escolarização da escola visitada, instituição particular dirigida por uma partidária da Escola Nova e que se destacava no cenário do estado do Rio de Janeiro e da Baixada Fluminense.

HISTÓRIA DA EDUCAÇÃO • ESCOLA REGIONAL DE MERITI • ARMANDA ALBERTO • YVONNE JEAN

## YVONNE JEAN: UNA MIRADA A LA ESCOLA REGIONAL DE MERITI, RJ, 1948

### Resumen

Tomando como fuente el relato de una visita de la periodista belga-brasileña Yvonne Jean a la Escola Regional de Meriti en 1948, el objetivo de este artículo es construir una comprensión de esa narrativa sobre méritos y deméritos, éxitos y fracasos, innovaciones y problemas del modelo educativo practicado en la escuela y teniendo en cuenta los propios desafíos de la educación brasileña en ese momento. Inicialmente, la atención recae sobre las prácticas innovadoras de la escuela de Meriti conforme la descripción e interpretación de Yvonne Jean; después, la atención se centra en sus consideraciones críticas sobre el modelo de escolarización de la escuela visitada, una institución privada dirigida por una partidaria de la Escola Nova y que se destacaba en el contexto del estado de Rio de Janeiro y de la Baixada Fluminense.

HISTORIA DE LA EDUCACIÓN • ESCOLA REGIONAL DE MERITI • ARMANDA  
ALBERTO • YVONNE JEAN

## YVONNE JEAN: UN REGARD SUR L'ESCOLA REGIONAL DE MERITI, RJ, 1948

### Résumé

Appuyé sur le récit d'une visite de la journaliste belgo-brésilienne Yvonne Jean à l'Escola Regional de Meriti en 1948, cet article entend construire une compréhension sur les mérites et les démérites, les succès et les échecs, les innovations et les problèmes du modèle éducatif pratiqué dans cette école au regard des défis propres à l'éducation brésilienne de l'époque. Dans un premier temps, l'attention se porte sur les pratiques innovatrices de l'école de Meriti telles que les a décrites et interprétées Yvonne Jean; dans un deuxième temps, l'accent est mis sur ses considérations critiques du modèle scolaire de l'école qu'elle a visitée, un établissement privé très en vue dans l'État de Rio de Janeiro et dans la Baixada Fluminense, dirigé par une adepte de l'Escola Nova d'orientation montessorienne.

HISTOIRE DE L'ÉDUCATION • ESCOLA REGIONAL DE MERITI • ARMANDA ALBERTO • YVONNE JEAN

Received on: DECEMBER 5, 2023 | Approved for publication on: JULY 3, 2024



This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons license, type BY.

**I**N THE LATE 1940s, THE BELGIAN JOURNALIST BASED IN BRAZIL YVONNE JEAN DA FONSECA (1911-1981) visited schools in the capital Rio de Janeiro and its metropolitan areas such as Baixada Fluminense. She wanted to know the school institutions: observe, talk, take notes... With the material collected and her impressions, she would feed columns in the Rio press. These had repercussions perhaps unanticipated by the columnist: they were read by high-ranking officials at the Ministério da Educação [Ministry of Education], where it was decided that these texts should be gathered into a book. Published in 1948, the book *Visitando escolas* [Visiting schools] (Jean, 1948) would become a kind of “official stocktaking” of the state of affairs of schools in the federal capital, and perhaps a model of research to be adopted elsewhere.

On her pilgrimage, Yvonne Jean went to visit Escola Regional de Meriti, a private school run by principal Armanda Álvaro Alberto (1892-1974), a signatory to *O manifesto dos pioneiros da educação nova* [The manifesto of new education pioneers] (1932); it was the only school outside the capital that she visited (Mignot, 2010), possibly due to the representativeness of its principal. Then a prominent educator, she would build a remarkable career between 1930 and 1960,<sup>1</sup> to the point of being considered the “Brazilian Montessori”. Not by chance, the Meriti school would become her greatest work; there she put into practice the assumptions of Escola Nova [New School] pedagogy, especially the focus on the student, on children’s freedom and creativity (Mignot, 2002).

In 1967, after retiring from the school principal office, Armanda Alberto published her only book: *A Escola Regional de Meriti – Documentário (1921-1964)* [Escola Regional de Meriti – Documentary (1921-1964)].

She gathered texts presented at national education conferences – “Tentativa de Escola Moderna” [Attempt of Escola Moderna] and “Uma experiência de escola regional” [An experience of regional school] – written in 1927 and 1932, testimonies of her main collaborators, references by her contemporaries, testimonies of former students, *impressions of visitors*, tributes, photographs. (Mignot, 2002, pp. 161-162, own translation, emphasis added).

One of the republished texts was precisely the one Yvonne Jean wrote almost twenty years earlier about the school. From this derives a curious effect: the historical-documentary validity of the columnist’s report on the principal’s practical educational experience at the institution; that is, she endorsed it as a record of what the school was like in the late 1940s. To move from curiosity to a grounded understanding, this work presents a historical-analytical study of Yvonne Jean’s text on Escola Regional de Meriti. The goal was to build an understanding of the report on the merits and demerits, successes and failures, innovations and problems of the educational model practiced in the school while considering the challenges inherent in Brazilian education in those days.

The research underlying this study was based on the following hypothesis: Yvonne Jean’s account reveals cultural filters (Ginzburg, 1991) – historical, ideological, political, religious, etc. – in its organization and contents; at the same time, it works as a historical-cultural filter by translating, to a distant majority, a reality seen up close. To her readership, what the columnist said about a given matter had the necessary attributes of trustworthiness regarding the object reproduced with her words; though it might be opinion writing, it was associated with the image, if not of truth, at least of reliability. To put it simply, the columnist’s text was not neutral. Faced with the context at the Meriti school, she did not limit herself to recounting it, but also sought to discuss and criticize

1 On Armanda Alberto’s trajectory, see the entry and book by Ana Chrystina Venâncio Mignot (2002, 2010, respectively).

in order to propose and discern; she made the educational experience recognized *in loco* an object of scrutiny in order to extract from it the useful and exemplary for other school education plans.

Our hypothesis unfolds through speculations on Yvonne Jean's text and its possible meanings, following a logic of understanding that considers pedagogical thinking. In this logic, and not by chance, the version of the account we speculate on (read, inquire, question) is the one published in the book by Armanda Alberto, the educator and education intellectual. Except for the title – possibly modified for editorial reasons by the book's author-organizer –, the text corresponds *verbatim* to the one published in 1948.<sup>2</sup>

Given the scope of our study, we present it in a dual logic. At first, the focus is on the innovative practices of the Meriti school as described and interpreted by Yvonne Jean; then, the focus is on her critical reflections on the schooling model of the visited school, a private institution run by a proponent of Escola Nova which excelled in the state of Rio de Janeiro and Baixada Fluminense, at least to the point of attracting the columnist's attention. For good reason, she stressed: "I made a point of spending a day in the State of Rio" (Jean, 2016, p. 149, own translation). So perhaps the visit lasted for the morning and afternoon school hours, an average of eight to nine hours, at most.

Before her visit to Escola Regional de Meriti, Yvonne Jean had accumulated eight years of life and intensive intellectual activity in Brazil. However, readers unaware of her origins might easily mistake her for a Brazilian – indeed, a true *carioca da gema* – given her fluency in Portuguese, the resonance of her texts with education day-to-day (as well as other aspects of Brazilian culture such as music and literature), and her presence in various journalistic media (with pertinence). These were merits that "concealed" her foreign origins. Born in Antwerp, she arrived in Rio de Janeiro in 1940, following the Jewish immigration movement driven by the Nazi invasion. She was 29 years old. Soon she would marry a Brazilian man and become naturalized. In the years following her arrival, she learned Portuguese quickly and in a way that allowed her to be an interlocutor in intellectual circles of the federal capital. Graduated in histology in Belgium, she got a job in the field, but she would actually devote herself to intellectual activity. She became an author of intense production – writing for newspapers and magazines –, a translator (of loose texts and books), and interpreter. In addition to the Portuguese learned in Brazil, she mastered Yiddish, Dutch, French, and English, at least (Teixeira, 2018).

It was with such a cultural, intellectual, and experiential repertoire that Yvonne Jean visited Escola Regional de Meriti; that is, from a journalistic perspective and with a somewhat brief time of contact with the local culture.

## A different school

The Meriti school had an older existence in Brazilian (school) culture – it was founded in 1921<sup>3</sup> as a private establishment. By the late 1940s, it was a consolidated institution: it had

2 For this study, we read the edition of the *Documentário* that was published by the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira [National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira] in 2016.

3 Mignot and Dias (2021, p. 6, own translation) studied Escola Regional de Meriti and make considerations that deserve to be mentioned here. The authors say: "Founded by Armanda Álvaro Alberto in Meriti, then a district of the municipality of Iguazu (currently belonging to the municipality of Duque de Caxias), in a time of political effervescence preceding the celebration of the centenary of Independence – an event that mobilized Brazilian society and educators – from the beginning it attracted the attention of those who defended education as the great national cause. The work developed in the rural part of Rio de Janeiro earned distinction in the country's educational scene because at a time of social appreciation of childhood it

educated generations of Baixada Fluminense residents, whose offspring were students at the school managed by Armanda Alberto. In her text on the Meriti school, Yvonne Jean highlighted what she saw as innovative practices: practical wisdom incorporated into the curriculum; school-family relationships; and the “mothers’ circle”. The passage below is representative of these aspects.

Another innovation is the importance she [the principal] gave to subjects that are not usually included in a typical school program: botany, zoology, and everything related to history (the school has an interesting museum of minerals, regional products, folk works, etc.), living geography, taught with the help of postcards and, above all, handicrafts and everything that develops manual skill. The girls embroider, sew, cook; the boys do carpentry work; everyone knows how to fix an electrical outlet and learns to make use of any old object to transform it according to their fantasy and skill. Supervised by a specialist teacher, they make many objects. I saw, for example, a tray, a coffee pot, red-painted cups and sugar bowls made from old tins of cookies, preserves, and talcum powder. They were so well-finished that it was hard to recognize their origin. The workshop is a wonder. Nothing is missing, from the workbench to the finest tools. (Jean, 2016, pp. 145-146, own translation).

The columnist’s interest was caught by the fact that the curriculum was not limited to the subject repertoire commonly found in the primary schools across the country; rather, it was expanded with knowledge of plant, animal, and social life, as well as knowledge about space (among other approaches to geography). Such knowledge was taught through a school museum,<sup>4</sup> a vestige of an innovation from the intuitive method appropriated by Escola Nova pedagogy. The collection contained everything from “minerals” to “folk works” and “regional products”. There was also reference to “postcard albums”, which were used to learn what Yvonne Jean called “living geography”. It was therefore a sensory education based on a person-object relationship that presumably occurred at the school.

Hand-made works were a second case of curriculum innovation devised by Armanda Alberto and highlighted by Yvonne Jean. Though we might be tempted to link this practice merely with early preparation of labor – especially as we find that “the girls embroider, sew, cook; the boys do carpentry work” (Jean, 2016, p. 146, own translation) –, we must, however, place it within the approaches of active school, which is centered on student experience and anything that might develop it.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the following quote is enlightening as it analyzes, in educational printed material, the meanings of manual crafts in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

translated a new look at children, one that aspired to more than instructing, educating, which implied providing observation and experimentation in daily classroom activities”.

4 About the diversity of school museum models, see the study by Marília Petry and Vera Gaspar da Silva (2013). From Yvonne Jean’s description alone, it is not possible to identify which type the Escola Regional de Meriti’s museum falls under – e.g., whether it was a closet or a dedicated room type. However, it certainly was not limited to a collection of wall art – one of the models identified by the authors –, since it had a range of objects. This is a peculiar aspect of the material school culture of that institution.

5 Some preparation for children to one day occupy job positions was not absent from Armanda Alberto’s concern, as Yvonne Jean noted: “The principal observes the children from the day they arrive and will not abandon them when they leave the school. Thanks to her efficient help, many were able to learn a profession and then get a good job. As they must work as soon as possible, Mrs. Álvaro Alberto looks to get them a good job that is not tiring, in Rio de Janeiro, whenever possible. This way, they have time and energy left to attend specialized courses in the evening. I am told that girls also benefit from the daily advice: when they get married, they make a point of having a clean and pleasant little house, very different from the home of their childhood” (Jean, 2016, p. 144, own translation). However, at no point does the journalist associate this need to enter the work world with manual crafts, which underscores that she, like Armanda Alberto, was more interested in the inventive and experiential aspect that this practice provided to children.

The centrality of Handicrafts in the period suggested here rested not only on the fact that it provided a nucleating element for other disciplines, but also because it supported the appeal for a public school education claimed as modern, which had action, activity, and autonomy as basic assumptions, as opposed to the traditional education considered belletristic, mnemonic, and passive. At least in speech, it was intended to overcome the pedagogical models of the past, endowing students with skills to face the challenges of the new world that was unfolding. (Oliveira, 2019, p. 403, own translation).

Yvonne Jean seems to have shared this manual craft conception by highlighting them in the day-to-day of Escola Regional de Meriti; above all, by saying that everyone there “learns to make use of any old object to transform it according to their fantasy and skill” (Jean, 2016, p. 146, own translation), that is, based on their experiences and worldviews. It was thanks to this fantasy and skill that they arrived at products such as “a tray, a coffee pot, red-painted cups and sugar bowls made from old tins of cookies, preserves, and talcum powder” (Jean, 2016, p. 146, own translation); everything so well-finished “that it was hard to recognize their origin”. The importance given to manual crafts was such that the school had a fully fitted workshop, with no shortage of the gear and tools necessary for the crafts. Concrete conditions were thus offered for students’ development at this education level.

Once at the Meriti school, Yvonne Jean was interested in another aspect: the principal’s encouragement of school-family relations. This subject, filled with tension, pervades the history of Brazilian education; for, in order to assert itself, the school had to remove the educational monopoly from the family (Faria, 2000). Not by chance, the Escola Nova movement postulated greater closeness between the school institution and the family, so that the child’s educational results could be more effective.

In this normalizing effort, the family continued to be a privileged target because it was known that nothing lasting could be done with a child in school if there was no receptiveness to pedagogical procedures in the domestic environment. Therefore, the family should conform or be made to conform to the principles dictated by the Escola Nova discourse. In theory, this applied to all families, regardless of social class. This rationale was justified by a recurrent conception of history and society hinging on the advances of the capitalist mode of production: the new configuration of the work world prevented families from properly educating their children. (Cunha, 2010, p. 457, own translation).

It is in this picture that the Meriti school setting is projected and understood as described by columnist Yvonne Jean, as follows.

The Meriti school is an integral part of students’ lives, as well as the lives of many families in the city of Duque de Caxias. When Mrs. Armanda Álvaro Alberto, founder, principal, and heart and soul of this school, said, “My school is the moral and social basis... We do whatever is in our power to raise the level of children... The cooperation of families in school work is indispensable...”, she was not posing theories, but principles that she intended to put into practice. She doesn’t just monitor her students’ health and mental progress. *She also visits their homes, seeks to teach order, cleanliness, and hygiene to parents, and interests them in the school, especially in the library.* This large and bright library contains an impressive number of children’s books, novels, pedagogical, scientific, and general interest

books. They are available to all families, whose interest I was able to see personally, because several ladies came to exchange books on the day of my visit. (Jean, 2016, p. 142, own translation, emphasis added).

The columnist added that Armanda Alberto herself recognized that “the cooperation of families in school work is indispensable”. However, it is worth noting that this was a passive cooperation in which the family allowed itself to be educated and moralized by the school. That becomes evident when the journalist reveals the principal’s presence in students’ homes to talk directly to their parents, to bring them “teaching” they supposedly lacked.

The school then worked as an irradiator of the “moral and social” basis of the Meriti school, in a perhaps isolated action intended to make families more receptive to what the school did for their children. One aspect of this action was precisely reading; that is, transforming families required a closer relationship with the library and its books, which were not limited to those of immediate interest to children, that is, children’s literature. There were pedagogy, scientific, literary, and general interest books intended for a wider audience that might include faculty and, above all, students’ families. Thus, the school managed to mobilize some mothers, that is, the ladies that Yvonne Jean saw exchanging books.

The reading ladies lead to a third aspect observed by the newspaper columnist at the Meriti school: The “circle of mothers”.

Always guided by a social sense, Mrs. Álvaro Alberto attaches great importance to the Circle of Mothers. She meets, advises, and guides numerous ladies. One must note here that she was the founder of the first Circle of Mothers, among us, in 1925. If these circles have multiplied and are now part of almost every public school, we owe this to her initiative. (Jean, 2016, p. 145, own translation).

Yvonne Jean briefly addressed the “circle of mothers” as a kind of auxiliary institution for the school, one that was widely known to her readership (strictly speaking, it was supposedly present in public schools of that time). She stressed that, on Armanda Alberto’s initiative, the action that started at the Meriti school became recurrent in other school institutions; it was supposedly a practice in which the founder “meets, advises, and guides”. Indeed, the meaning of that circle was referred to by Armanda Alberto in a work presented at the fifth Conferência Nacional de Educação [National Conference on Education] of the Associação Brasileira de Educação [Brazilian Education Association] in 1932, which is part of her 1967 documentary work; the following passage is illustrative in this respect.

In certain aspects, however, the Circle of Mothers outclasses any other similar activity held by the school. Those women’s relationship with us, due to the frankness they use, is even touching. They come with one or two little children in their arms or led by the hand, and around the dining room table, much like they learn, they also teach their bit. It is from their confidences, complaints, and criticism that we collect the best part of the information material necessary to keep the school up to date with local life. (Alberto, 2016, pp. 63-64, own translation).

Thus, for Armanda Alberto, the “circle of mothers” appears as another facet of the school-family relationship; it is a space for exchange: she taught the mothers something, and *vice versa*. Ultimately, she was left with important and necessary information to go about the

action of bringing the school closer to local life. In the process of exchanging with the “circle of mothers”, the exchanged matter included new habits to be transmitted to and instilled in families, as Mignot says (2010, p. 93, own translation): “With notions of hygiene, domestic economy, and family education, she intended to disseminate scientific knowledge, contributing for the women, as enlightened citizens, to value child care”. It is as if the contact with families’ reality in school told the school principal of a reality that had to be transformed and modified because it did not fit the parameters and precepts of hygiene, economy, and conduct – precepts inscribed in school activity. Thus, conditions were sought for the school institution to have a successful effect not only within its facilities but also within students’ family environments; an effect that can be translated not only by the family’s presence in the school space, but also by the school’s presence in the family environment to build a space for itself therein.

Here, then, is what we can derive from Yvonne Jean’s brief account on a topic already known to the readers of her columns. The picture outlined is that of the Meriti school’s innovative actions in the central relationships between school and family. In this sense, the school library was designed as a kind of meeting point for fostering intra-school contacts with family members, who were in turn members of the community – the neighborhood – related to the school. In this condition, the library was assigned a sociocultural role that was also a community one: it became useful outside its walls.

Indeed, where the state did not act, private initiative did. But the extent of those private actions did not exempt them from flaws, at least in the eyes and ears of Yvonne Jean. From the material to the intellectual and educational aspects, from the school’s conditions of existence to the conditions of existence in the neighborhood where the school was located, as well as pedagogical-didactic practices, everything came under her scrutiny, and she saw problems: limitations, inconsistencies, and other negative points. The visiting columnist’s text made considerations about what she saw, in the observed school experience, as subject to critical observation.

### **Problems of an innovative school?**

The scrutiny of Yvonne Jean’s eye had a wide scope. One might say that she tried to see the school in its external dimension – where it relates with the urban landscape – and its internal dimension – which presumes what is unique to school space, whether its practice or theory. Thus, from the way to the school she had been observing the travel conditions through the city to the school building and the absence of state action. From her observations she took impressions to speak of “total apathy” by the government – in this case the municipal government. The following quote is exemplary of this attention to the urban landscape.

The state of the road leading to school: it is not paved, undergrowth invades, and neighborhood garbage piles up in front of the school. It would be essential to pave a street where so many children pass daily. That would not only help the school, but also improve the aspect of the city of Duque de Caxias. (Jean, 2016, p. 148, own translation).

Indeed, the visiting columnist says that the school stood out in the landscape – in the “general environment” of a metropolitan area, that is, a peripheral one – and her “impression” was of one of “poverty and backwardness” in many respects. In this case, at the school she would see the school meal: a “daily soup”, which the visitor saw as a “most useful institution”, and it was the “only school in the city” to offer meals to students (Jean, 2016, p. 146, own translation).



However, it is necessary to read this generalist-omniscient understanding in light of the visit length, as brief as a school day; on the other hand, the school differed from the profile of the other institutions Yvonne Jean was then visiting – public schools in the federal capital. Therefore, from an average eight hours covering both the morning and afternoon shifts, it is fair to assume that the visitor spent much more time in the school’s interior than in its exterior (which she possibly observed *en passant* as she came and went). Whatever she saw was seen superficially, however accurate her eye might have been then.

Once inside the school and familiar with its parts, Yvonne Jean was able to discern the wheat from the chaff, like her observation of the vegetables and the garden trees: The “vegetable garden was large”, though the earth was “sandy and dry”; there were trees, but these were not “leafy”. The columnist would pay more attention to the teaching and learning process – conditions, agents, and practices. In her critical scrutiny, the schooling practices were seen from the perspective of shortcomings, both institutional – having professionals – and pedagogical – the curriculum, material, student practices, teachers, etc.

Indeed, Yvonne Jean encountered a problem that would affect the whole of Brazilian education in the first half of the last century: the lack not only of schools, but also of teachers with training (normal school). In her words, it was “difficult to find good teachers” willing to work in a “poor, private school”. The preference of “a majority” was for schools in the Federal District – where “wages are greater” – or for “private, rich establishments” (Jean, 2016, p. 147, own translation). Therefore, between demand and satisfaction, a somewhat perverse relationship emerged: private schools were not only restricted to a limited part of the population – the one that could afford it – but also absorbed the more qualified labor – trained teachers.

Yvonne Jean’s omniscient tone, though, allows for relativization, as she does not say which teachers and which majority she refers to, or what the profile of a good teacher would be like. Thus, her reference to what is lacking and to staff allocation is weakened as a fact and strengthened as an assumption. Still, she touches on a central problem: the relationship between the teaching profession and working conditions, such as wages; at the same time, she suggests that teaching wealthy people in private schools did not necessarily mean higher wages, perhaps just more favorable conditions. Therefore, based on the columnist’s perspective, one could think that, among social strata without the means to afford school, the educational shortage was twofold: there was a lack not only of public school institutions but also of teachers to work in private schools that served such strata; and these were generally concentrated in peripheral neighborhoods without other urban facilities, such as public libraries,<sup>6</sup> health centers, leisure areas, etc.

Such was the reality of the Meriti school: being one of the “so very rare private schools” dedicated to “poor children”, as Yvonne Jean said (2016, p. 147, own translation). She had a clear conception of private school: to be a business whose primary purpose is to “make a lot of money”; that is, a school for “wealthy children”. And with this conception, the visited school was not aligned. What is more, in the columnist’s view, the visited institution did not align with the argument that one role of “private initiative” was to solve the education problem; an argument held by Armanda Alberto in an academic work published at the 1927 Conferência Nacional de Educação [National Conference on Education]. On the occasion, she said that “Without the private initiative,

6 Armanda Álvaro published the text “Pela criação de bibliotecas infantis” [For the creation of children’s libraries] (cf. Mignot, 2010).

Brazil will not solve the problem of *people's education* so soon”; and that “The Escola Regional de Meriti’s highest aspiration is to be reproduced across the country” (Alberto, 1927/1997, p. 451, own translation, emphasis added).

It is possible that Yvonne Jean (2016, p. 147, own translation) had read the text before the visit, as she refers to the “work presented in 1927”, and not to an occasional *talk* with the principal *in loco*. In any case, it is worth noting her focus on Armanda Alberto’s categorical affirmation: “And here we arrive at a point where I disagree with Mrs. Armanda Álvaro Alberto”. The columnist did not deny the importance of the private initiative in “places far into the hinterland”<sup>7</sup> or in “large farms” or “villages”; moreover, she recognized its value for the “progress of education” in large cities. Yet her view was a different one.

My point of view is that in the future we will need to concentrate all energies to improve education. *The campaign for education* will only bring compensating results when efforts are no longer divided. Examples, suggestions, and particular initiatives should be taken advantage of, but the general working plan, inspection, fund distribution, and general management *should be public work*. . . . Educational measures should follow a general basic line because *private schools will always face financial difficulties*. . . . Our ultimate goal should be the complete reorganization of the education system across the country. Private schools . . . are a palliative. I am against palliatives because they indicate an adaptation to existing conditions. . . . The general reorganization of education must be rational. If it should not encourage isolated particular initiatives too much, neither can it be guided by the individual suggestions of this or that employee. (Jean, 2016, pp. 149-150, own translation, emphasis added).

This passage is expressive of certain conceptions of Yvonne Jean and open to many readings. On a general level, it touches on a complex problem: the establishment of a national education system under the government’s directions. This system would bring the unity necessary to summon forces and initiatives – “concentrate all energies” – to a common goal – “to improve education”. In fact, the history of education in Brazil shows that, in the late 1940s, one of the serious problems was the lack of unity among the schools that formed the educational apparatus. The *grupo escolar*, propagated across the country as a viable model to constitute a primary school system, for example, ran into the funding issue – its materialization. The state had a duty to create *grupos escolares*; municipalities, to build and manage them. Their management relied on local governments’ economic and political conditions, which would be determinative for any school unification and systematization plan (see, for example, Souza, 1998; Vidal, 2006; Saviani, 2007).

The forcefulness of Armanda Alberto’s thought invites reflection on Yvonne Jean’s words. Indeed, her resuming the defense of private school as the theme of the column allows for the interpretation that she may have dealt with the subject with the principal on the day of her visit; and that, in doing so, she made sure that the educator supported the same opinion of 1927. However, there is no literal indication of such a conversation – presumptive as it may be. The columnist’s text does not refer to people with whom she may have interacted when visiting the school of Meriti.

7 The city of Ituiutaba, MG, is an example of a society where private school played an important role in the urban schooling process. From 1910 to 1950, it had two schools, one active since 1910, and another starting in 1947. Interestingly, urban literacy in 1950 was over 60% for the female population and above 80% for the male population. These rates were mainly the result of the private schools that opened in the municipality from 1900 to 1950: 12 in all (cf. Baduy, 2020, p. 60).

The only part similar to a reference to someone's discourse is precisely to Armanda Alberto's text; other than this, what the columnist did was act like a novelist: she projected an image of the principal as a character acting and reacting to what she saw in the school she ran in the late 1940s.

I imagine that, many times, Mrs. Armanda puts her hands on her head, thinking: "Have the efforts and sacrifice of twenty-six years in a row given a rewarding result?" But she will never abandon her life's work because she knows that she saved the health of many, educated many characters, and managed to make efficient men out of some very poor children. However, great must be the distance separating what she dreamed and what she could accomplish. (Jean, 2016, p. 148, own translation).

It is quite possible that the scene was in fact imagined by the columnist, and not a fact that unfolded between her and the principal on the day of her visit; and the adverbial phrase of frequency "many times" seems to endorse this interpretation. Surely, the scene is grounded in reality, in observations and conversation during the visit to the school; but the image projected by Yvonne Jean highlights traces of an educator-principal conducting a school project between difficulties and successes, desires and concrete reality..., as well as in the midst of self-reflection on her efforts. From the columnist's imagination emanates the figure of an educator with a hint of fatigue, disbelief, uncertainty – so far, had the work "given a rewarding result?". A little more than two decades of labor had gone by amid problems of a different order, but mainly financial ones; the same ones that affected the school community. Thus, it is possible that, by 1948, the enthusiasm shown in 1927 by Armanda Alberto had cooled a little, that is, maybe she no longer saw private schools as a model to remedy the problem of education in Brazil. At least in this regard, Yvonne Jean alluded to the principal's past ideas, not from the present of her visit to the school.

If so, then we may consider Yvonne Jean's disagreement with Armanda Alberto's defense of private school from 1927 as anachronistic. Likewise, we may infer that problems noticed by the visitor and others were also known to the principal. After all, she was a professional who found herself reflecting on her work; this is proved by texts she wrote and published since 1927, dealing with modern schools, regional educational guidelines, and reading among adults, texts communicating inquiries on children's books, and texts advocating children's libraries and discussing the conditions of primary teachers, among other points (cf. Mignot, 2010).

Therefore, as an educator-principal aware of the reality she dealt with, it would be clear to her that the educational problem was structural and national; that is, it went beyond the ideal conditions to achieve localized desires of schooling. But, in the face of lack, one did the minimum necessary to keep the endeavor: contributing to the health of many (it is possible that the soup served at the school was one of the few daily meals for several students); building student character (the columnist would recognize the emphasis on moral education); and finally, offering minimal school training so that children could see more promising prospects in adult life, of leaving behind the condition of poverty in which they lived.

Not by chance, the school program and teaching entered the scrutiny of Yvonne Jean, as suggested in the following passage.

At the Meriti school, . . . basic education is less developed than in most public schools. Students have a *moral basis*, a touching *sense of responsibility*, great manual skill, and useful knowledge, due to permanent contact with nature, but their math or language notebooks are poorly kept. *This fact stems partly from the very low level of the family life of each of*

*them*. The drawings, which always give a good idea of the general development of a child, prove their mental state. *I could not find at the Meriti school a single drawing that revealed imagination, fantasy, poetry, originality*, and whose clumsy traits revealed an artistic search. The straight and perfect lines resemble technical projects, perhaps because these children ignore that sometimes it is useful to let fantasy run by chance, without having in mind an immediate practical result. Their life is hard, and they cannot discern the possibility of such luxuries, as they have never seen these in their homes. (Jean, 2016, p. 148, own translation, emphasis added).

The words of the columnist reveal a tone of omniscience and authority. Supposedly, she knew well the community the school belonged to; and she knew most of the country's public schools; besides knowing psychology of learning, that is, recognizing traits of cognitive development and probable causes – the “very low level” of something not said. *Her* understanding was the measure of judgment to say what learning was; that is, the fact that *she* could not find something *she* considered a measure of school development was enough to affirm the absence of artistic intent in education and the presence of apathetic students: unable to imagine and fantasize (to be children). Such an opinion contrasted with what the columnist herself said, because she recognized the exercise of fantasy in students' manual works, those done in the workshop and which she praised. It is as if the students were able to fantasize and materialize their fantasies in objects, but not in sentences, paragraphs and texts, in verses, in equations, calculations and mathematical reasoning. To expect attributes such as poetry and originality in primary students' activities shows an expectation that is not consistent with educational reality, for someone who claimed to know the reality of public schools and referred to stages/forms of school learning.

However, the incipient criticism of Yvonne Jean does not hide the backdrop on which her comments are projected. The Meriti school was part of a larger educational apparatus that, even if not systematized, was crossed by a *Leitmotiv*: the duality of schooling. Thus, for elitist social strata (financial and political elites, owners of the means of production, ruling classes, etc.), the education was designed to prepare them for continuing their social distinctions; for non-elitist social strata (the poor population, working class, subaltern classes, etc.), the schooling was meant to prepare them for maintaining their usefulness in supporting the elites and social hierarchies. In a nutshell, there are schools to prepare the offspring of entrepreneurs to become future administrators of their companies, and schools to teach the offspring of those who work in the companies (see, for example, Libâneo, 2012; Kuenzer, 2007).

Apparently fitting into this logic of understanding was what the columnist saw: more learning of a moral sense, responsibility, and manual skill, and less learning of mathematics and Portuguese (developing the intellect, logical reasoning, analysis, projection...); more work with elementary geometric forms (reproduction of patterns), and less dealing with abstractions, colors, free forms (invention of patterns); finally, learning that is more suited to practical, immediate results and less so to reflection and intellectual education and development; and so on.

As a product of her visit to the school during a school day, Yvonne Jean made a rather profound reflection on the reality she encountered superficially, even though it included a presentation of details. Part of what she says in her text does not necessarily come from the information collected through the observations and conversations that took place during her time at the Meriti school; rather, it comes from readings of academic texts and knowledge built on information and observations related to public schools in the then federal capital.

Yvonne Jean's reflection gave more emphasis to the problems: what she saw as "inherent flaws in private education", whose teaching had "excellent but fluctuating innovations", was admirable but criticized. If so, then the logic of fluctuation seems to have pervaded her presentation, because it follows a rhythm in which she uses euphemistic phrases to soften her criticism, as in these examples: "The principle is *excellent*, but it can only be put into practice by experienced teachers"; "The teachers who help the principal are *filled with goodwill*, but their training does not support developed personal initiatives" (Jean, 2016, p. 148, own translation, emphasis added). Something is well, but there is almost always a more important if or but.

The mentioned principle refers to the freedom given to teachers at the Meriti school, where *one* teacher was in charge of "several classes", and "students' wishes" were followed. On the one hand, there was no "set time" for classes; on the other hand, in order not to lose "students' attention", a class might combine "several subjects", subtly intertwined. For the columnist, such didactics was problematic as it could result in a situation where students had more interest "in the easier or more pleasant subjects", rather than being instructed to "assimilate the more arid lessons" (Jean, 2016, p. 148, own translation).

The columnist thus arrived at an opinion text that advocates creating an educational system of *public schools* under the state's responsibility and open to private initiative and its contribution. But her opinion is built on an emphatic description of what she considered to be flawed in private schools, which is contradicted by the text itself: though she says private school is inherently flawed – a somewhat categorical statement –, the columnist also says that the problem with private schooling was the untrained teachers.

Still, Armanda Alberto – the target of Yvonne Jean's criticism – saw historical-educational merit in the columnist's text by including it in a collection of texts on Escola Regional de Meriti. For all purposes, the report joined a collection of discourses around what the school was and did and how its existence and operation reached the eyes of society. The critical point lies in the cultural filters that these discourses went through before being publicized and circulating as "truths"; filters from which Yvonne Jean would not escape.

## Final considerations

Indeed, Yvonne Jean reveals certain cultural and historical filters in her text on Escola Regional de Meriti – her discourse.

There is a space-time filter, that is, the presumed limits when considering the experience of one school day and one school; the risks are a certain superficiality and a recurrently omniscient tone that subjects reality to prior knowledge. In the school's space-time, another filter is the voice of the people she interacted with and heard in her inquiries to satisfy her curiosity about the school. In roughly eight hours, she divided her attention and actions between watching, taking notes, and talking, so as to ask questions and listen to answers. Thus, from the talks, she extracted themes for her column that came not from what she saw but from what she heard. Reported in the text, facts *heard* assumed the conditions necessary to be read as facts *seen* by the visitor, since the author does not attribute knowledge of these facts to third parties. More than not crediting others for information contained in her text, Yvonne Jean took the fact as a measure to judge the schooling for the neighborhood population as "awful" and the conduct of inhabitants as backward. In other words, the columnist takes a part for the whole: she takes an isolated fact – already filtered

by her interlocutors – and makes it the rule, the standard. One person's attitude was enough to fit the whole into a category. At the same time, her judgment seems to contain a hint of contradiction: it suffices to remember that the "circle of mothers" was a positive reaction of the population to the school's act of opening its library to the community; that is, the fact that women sought the school to exchange books tells us that the population was not disengaged from all of the school's work, that it reacted to its initiatives and fed them.

Additionally, there is a rigorous cultural filter, that is, the presumptive limitations in the perspective of a European with no more than nine years of life in Brazil, specifically in Rio de Janeiro, the federal capital. With a degree in histology and being a newspaper columnist by practice, Yvonne Jean certainly lacked further immersion in Brazil's education problem and its historical movements. In her incursions in Rio de Janeiro schools, there was an encounter between the stark reality of Brazil's post-war education and the experience and memory of European education – of the state's role in education – and a certain ideation from readings on Brazilian education and culture.

The Belgian Jewish Yvonne Jean did show her intellectual abilities: in less than ten years, she learned Brazilian Portuguese well enough to start writing for several press outlets in the federal capital, and it is quite possible that much of her understanding of Brazilian reality came from reading and engaging with these outlets. Yet it is possible that readings and about a decade of life in Brazil were not enough to assimilate the depth and historicity of the distinctions between Brazil of the federal capital and Brazil of the other regions – the hinterland, the backcountry. The idea that the school's students had more contact with nature than with subjects of intellectual and logical development, like mathematics and Portuguese, echoed a certain preconception of foreigners, especially French travelers or French people residing here, namely: the exuberance of nature compensated for the lack of civilization, which was to be provided by Europeans (see, for example, Barbato, 2015).

Finally, there was the historical filter, meaning restrictions arising from the lack of deeper contact with the historical process of Brazilian education. In this respect, while Armanda Alberto postulated private schools as a model for the country in 1927, she was part of a group of fierce advocates of public (free) and secular primary schools – educators linked to the Escola Nova movement; the defense of private schools was more aligned with sectors linked to the Catholic Church (traditional pedagogy). On the other hand, the principal's ideas had historical roots: at least in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, private schools were more present than the state, especially in the hinterland. The federal capital, for equally historical reasons, was no measure for the whole; since the arrival of the royal family in 1808, *the city* of Rio de Janeiro had become more equipped with educational institutions.

Such filters are not exclusive to Yvonne Jean's text on education in Brazil or to her understanding of reality. If carefully examined, similar textual opinions made by Brazilians will surely contain filters, such as religious faith, which significantly marked the debate about the course of education, especially from the 1930s onwards, between Catholic intellectuals/educators and pro-secular state intellectuals/educators. More than a problem, such filters are invitations to historical investigation as a valuable component for discussing the records of life in the past and challenging attempts to naturalize the historical (educational) process.

## References

- Alberto, A. Á. (1932). O manifesto dos pioneiros da educação nova. *HISTEDBR*. [https://www.histedbr.fe.unicamp.br/pf-histedbr/manifesto\\_1932.pdf](https://www.histedbr.fe.unicamp.br/pf-histedbr/manifesto_1932.pdf)
- Alberto, A. Á. (1997). A Escola Regional de Meriti – Uma tentativa de escola moderna. Tese n. 79. In M. J. F. F. Costa, D. R. Shena, & M. A. Schmidt (Orgs.), *I Conferência Nacional de Educação* (pp. 446-451). Inep. (Obra original publicada em 1927).
- Alberto, A. Á. (2016). Uma experiência de escola regional. In A. Á. Alberto (Org.), *A Escola Regional de Meriti – Documentário (1921-1964)* (pp. 57-66). Inep.
- Baduy, M. (2020). *Grupo Escolar Prof. Ildelfonso Mascarenhas da Silva: Sua historicidade e o contexto econômico e social de Ituiutaba em sua implantação* [Dissertação de mestrado, Universidade Federal de Uberlândia]. Repositório Institucional – Universidade Federal de Uberlândia. <https://repositorio.ufu.br/handle/123456789/29313>
- Barbato, L. F. T. (2015). *Entre preconceitos, conceitos e impressões: O Brasil e sua condição tropical na Revue des Deux Mondes (1829-1977)* [Tese de doutorado, Universidade Estadual de Campinas]. Repositório da Produção Científica e Intelectual da Unicamp. <https://repositorio.unicamp.br/acervo/detalhe/950576>
- Cunha, M. V. (2010). A escola contra a família. In E. M. S. T. Lopes, L. M. de Faria, Júnior, & C. G. Veiga (Orgs.), *500 anos de educação no Brasil* (pp. 447-468). Autêntica.
- Faria, L. M. de, Filho. (2000). Para entender a relação escola-família: Uma contribuição da história da educação. *São Paulo em Perspectiva*, 14(2), 44-50. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0102-88392000000200007>
- Ginzburg, C. (1991). Os pombos abriram os olhos: Conspiração popular na Itália do século XVII. In C. Ginzburg, E. Castelnuovo, & C. Poni, *A micro-história e outros ensaios* (pp. 131-142). Difel.
- Jean, Y. (1948). *Visitando escolas*. Ministério da Educação e Saúde.
- Jean, Y. (2016). Inovações admiráveis. In A. Á. Alberto (Org.), *A Escola Regional de Meriti – Documentário* (pp. 143-150). Inep.
- Kuenzer, A. Z. (2007). Da dualidade assumida à dualidade negada: O discurso da flexibilização justifica a inclusão excludente. *Educação & Sociedade*, 28(100), 1153-1178. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0101-73302007000300024>
- Libâneo, J. C. (2012). O dualismo perverso da escola pública brasileira: Escola do conhecimento para os ricos, escola do acolhimento social para os pobres. *Educação e Pesquisa*, 38(1), 13-28. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1517-97022011005000001>
- Mignot, A. C. V. (2002). Armanda Álvaro Alberto. In M. L. Fávero, & J. M. Britto (Orgs.), *Dicionário de educadores do Brasil: Da Colônia aos dias atuais* (pp. 154-163). Inep.
- Mignot, A. C. V. (2010). *Armanda Álvaro Alberto*. Fundação Joaquim Nabuco; Massangana.
- Mignot, A. C. V., & Dias, A. (2021). Apresentação. *Revista Linhas*, 22(50), 5-11. <https://doi.org/10.5965/1984723822502021005>
- Oliveira, M. A. T. (2019). O *ethos* do trabalho nas páginas de periódicos educacionais brasileiros: *Trabalhos manuais* como signo da modernização pedagógica (1906-1934). *Cadernos de História da Educação*, 18(2), 386-405. <https://doi.org/10.14393/che-v18n2-2019-7>
- Petry, M. G., & Silva, V. L. G. da. (2013). Museu escolar: Sentidos, propostas e projetos para a escola primária (séculos 19 e 20). *História da Educação*, 17(41), 79-101. <https://seer.ufrgs.br/index.php/asphe/article/view/38773>
- Saviani, D. (2007). *História das ideias pedagógicas no Brasil*. Autores Associados.

- Souza, R. F. (1998). *Templos de civilização: A implantação da escola primária graduada no Estado de São Paulo (1890-1910)*. Editora Unesp.
- Teixeira, A. P. T. (2018). *Uma cosmopolita nos trópicos: A trajetória de Yvonne Jean no jornalismo carioca (1940-1950)* [Tese de doutorado, Fundação Getulio Vargas]. FGV Repositório Institucional Acadêmico. <https://repositorio.fgv.br/items/9395924b-9d3c-46fc-8d7f-f6719e9fa4cb>
- Vidal, D. G. (2006). *Grupos escolares: Cultura escolar primária e escolarização da infância no Brasil (1893-1971)*. Mercado de Letras.

### Note on authorship

Juarez José Tuchinski dos Anjos – data collection and writing.  
Betânia de Oliveira Laterza Ribeiro – data collection and writing.

### Data availability statement

The data underlying the research text are reported in the article.

### How to cite this article

Anjos, J. J. T. dos, & Ribeiro, B. de O. L. (2024). Yvonne Jean: A look at Escola Regional de Meriti, RJ, 1948. *Cadernos de Pesquisa*, 54, Article e10773.  
[https://doi.org/10.1590/1980531410773\\_en](https://doi.org/10.1590/1980531410773_en)