

**SCHOOL GEOGRAPHY IN THE PROVINCE OF MINAS GERAIS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF BRAZILIAN GEOGRAPHY** <https://doi.org/10.63330/aurumpub.010-003>**Eduardo José Pereira Maia<sup>1</sup>****ABSTRACT**

This study aims to understand the history of school geography in the province of Minas Gerais from 1854 to 1889. It analyzes the process of the institutionalization of geography in Minas Gerais and, consequently, in Brazil during the second half of the nineteenth century. The thesis is based on the assumption that the teaching of geography was not confined to the Colégio Pedro II and that its development was not merely a simplification of academic and scientific knowledge. On the contrary, it was a slow process of disciplinarization, in which textbook authors and teachers from primary, normal, and secondary schools played a crucial role. This work also aimed to analyze the purposes of teaching geography beyond the prescriptive realm, in an investigation that combined the analysis of curricular prescriptions with everyday classroom practices. The main sources analyzed, in addition to legislation, included school curricula, educational board reports, tests and exams, meeting minutes and official opinions, all gathered from the Public Archive of Minas Gerais (APM); school textbooks on Geography and Chorography sourced from the Didactic Book Library of the Faculty of Education of the University of São Paulo (BLD/FEUSP), the National Library, the State Library of Minas Gerais, and the Digital Library of the Federal Senate; the Pedro II School Memory Center (NUDOM); and other documents obtained through the Brazilian Schoolbook Database (LIVRES).

**Keywords:** Institutionalization; School Geography; Nineteenth Century.

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## INTRODUCTION

This work is the result of research conducted in subsequent years at the Laboratory for Research in Geography and Education (LAGE/UFRJ). The objective was to study the history of school geography from 1850 to 1889. The temporal framework was defined based on the creation of secondary schools in the provinces of the Empire during the second half of the nineteenth century, with particular emphasis in this text on the Liceu Mineiro. A careful literature review on the subject revealed that researchers dedicated to the history of geography and school geography have not prioritized the study of educational institutions, with the exception of the Colégio Pedro II, regarded as a model and disseminator of knowledge throughout the provinces of the Empire.

Two key issues emerged from the analysis of research in school geography. The first concerns the process of the geography schooling as a landmark for understanding the history of geography in Brazil. The second pertains to the methodological demands regarding the selection of research sources. As school geography was considered a minor, insignificant subject, and an exclusive product of legislation, research sources were largely restricted to official curricula. Few investigations ventured beyond imperial decrees. One exception was the study of didactic manuals which, due to their material nature as school artifacts (FORQUIN, 1993), received more attention from scholars of geography education (2020).

Building on these works and existing research, we present an alternative approach: to utilize sources that, for various reasons, were neglected—especially those until recently considered rare or even nonexistent, such as tests, exams, and student activities.

This research aimed to investigate the geography schooling in Brazil during the second half of the nineteenth century, interpreting “schooling” as “the process of producing social references, meanings, and knowledge transmission” within the school environment (FARIA FILHO, 2002). This interpretation is crucial for understanding the history of the discipline of geography—central to this research—which finds in the school its primary vehicle for the dissemination of geographic knowledge and discourse.

In general, school subjects are identified and justified in four main ways, originating from knowledge recognized outside of the school setting. Several factors contribute to the institutionalization of school subjects. First, a subject is the collective activity of those who practice it. The geography that is taught, therefore, is shaped by what teachers and textbook authors decide to teach. They determine the purposes (CHERVEL, 1990) and create a positive, utilitarian image. In this context, success is achieved when there is a favorable response from society, and—regarding geography—the recognition of its value as indispensable knowledge for understanding territory, a cornerstone for building a modern and civilized nation. Second, a subject differentiates itself from others by its object of study—that is, its themes, subject matter, or specific content. It is a field that becomes delineated and is qualified by a distinctive vernacular or specialized lexicon. Third, a subject adopts particular teaching methodologies dictated by



the nature of the content to be taught. In geography's case, this includes the use of maps, globes, atlases, images, and fieldwork. Fourth, a subject is defined by the ways it is manifested across various levels of education, as well as by the effects of geographical knowledge learned within and outside of school settings.

## SCHOOL GEOGRAPHY AND RESEARCH – METHODOLOGY

In analyzing research on school Geography and school knowledge, I have highlighted two key issues that deserve greater attention. One is the process of Geography schooling as a foundational aspect in understanding the history of Geography in Brazil. However, studies have generally not considered the school-based form of Geography as knowledge with the potential for in-depth investigation. School knowledge was often deemed inferior and, for this reason, was largely neglected in academic research.

In this context, the second issue relates to the methodological demands involved in selecting research sources. Since school Geography was regarded as a lesser, insignificant form of knowledge and merely a product of legislation, source selection was often limited to official curricula. Few studies have ventured beyond imperial decrees. An exception is made for textbooks, which—by virtue of their physical form as educational artifacts<sup>2</sup>, have received more attention from researchers in the history of Geography. In light of this and existing research, I proposed an alternative analytical path: to use sources that, for various reasons, had been forgotten—especially those that were until recently considered rare or even nonexistent, such as tests, exams, and student activities.

As research sources, I used imperial and provincial legislation, didactic manuals, periodicals in circulation during the period, and especially exams, tests, and official evaluations, which more precisely indicate the content taught in schools. The sources were researched in two sets of collections, which I classified as general and specific. The specific collection refers to the official documentation of schools in Minas Gerais, primarily housed at the Arquivo Público Mineiro (APM). The general collection includes the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute (IHGB), the National Library (BN), the Royal Portuguese Reading Cabinet, the National Historical Archive, the State Library of Minas Gerais, the Digital Library of the Federal Senate, the Memory Center of Colégio Pedro II (NUDOM), the Textbook Library of the School of Education at the University of São Paulo (BLD/FEUSP), and the LIVRES database of the Memory Center for Education at FEUSP.

In examining documents from secondary school institutions in the Province of Minas Gerais,

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<sup>2</sup>The concept of the textbook as a school artefact is part of what Jean-Claude Forquin (1993, p. 167) called “the set of cognitive and symbolic contents which, selected, organized, ‘normalized’ and ‘routinized’ under the effect of didactic imperatives, usually constitute the object of deliberate transmission within schools”. Textbooks were therefore produced for the school world with the aim of collaborating in the teaching process in a systematized way.



located at the APM, I focused on materials referring to the Geography chair, primarily from the period between 1854 and 1889. The year 1854 marks the establishment of the Liceu Mineiro<sup>3</sup> and other educational institutions, while 1889 was chosen as the endpoint based on the significant number of documents that reflect the state of Geography education in Minas Gerais during the second half of the 19th century. It is also worth noting that by this time, in addition to the Liceu Mineiro, over two dozen secondary institutions were functioning regularly in the province. Numerous secondary institutions were created, annexed, and closed throughout the period. Documents from various schools, seminaries, and the Liceu Mineiro all confirmed the presence of an active Geography chair

In this research, I present a twofold approach: the first, the documentary sources that represent official guidelines; the second, documents produced as a result of those guidelines, which are embedded in everyday pedagogical practices. As a framework, I considered eight aspects:

1. The presence of the discipline in curricula, considering the frequency of Geography in official programs, legislation, and public instruction reports;
2. The designation given to the Geography discipline, taking into account the terminology used during the period and its qualifiers;
3. The content covered in Geography or considered geographical, and how the prescribed content appeared in curricula, textbooks, and programs;
4. The weight of Geography in the programs, considering the time allocated to the subject within the school calendar;
5. The explicit and implicit objectives of the subject;
6. The discourses that authorize and legitimize it as a school subject;
7. Teacher training, particularly as assessed in public service exams and also in academic theses;
8. Records of daily school practices: tests and exams, official evaluations, or other possible documentation.

## THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF BRAZILIAN GEOGRAPHY – LITERATURE REVIEW

A careful review of the relevant literature reveals that researchers dedicated to the history of Geography have not analyzed the educational institutions of the Empire, with the exception of Colégio Pedro II, which has been considered the model and disseminator of knowledge in the provinces of the Empire.

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<sup>3</sup>According to the legislation, these establishments had to teach Grammar and Philology of the National Language; Latin Grammar and Poetry; French; English; Geography; History; Philosophy, Rhetoric, Elementary Mathematics and Pharmacy from the 1st year.



The existing research generally follows the classical narratives in the history of Geography, including works by Pasquale Petrone (1979), Carlos Augusto de Figueiredo Monteiro (1980), Nelson Werneck Sodré (1982), Manuel Correia de Andrade (1992), José Veríssimo Pereira (1994), Raquel Maria Fontes do Amaral Pereira (1999), and Ruy Moreira (2010). These authors contend that Geography teaching in Brazil was only institutionalized starting in the 1930s and thus suggest that historical studies of this discipline should only focus on the period beginning in that decade. What existed prior to this, they argue, should be classified as the history of geographical thought.

I therefore present some factors I consider to be responsible for the institutionalization processes of school subjects. In general, school disciplines are identified and justified in four main ways based on knowledge that is recognized outside the school environment.

The first factor is that a discipline is the collective activity of the people who practice it. Hence, the Geography that is taught is shaped by what teachers and textbook authors choose to teach. They define its aims and build a positive and utilitarian image of the subject. This is successful when there is a favorable response from society and, in the case of Geography, when it is recognized as essential knowledge for understanding the territory—a foundation for building a modern and civilized nation.

The second factor is the distinction between disciplines, based on their object of study—in other words, their themes, subjects, or specific content. This refers to a field that becomes defined and is characterized by a particular “vernacular” or specialized lexicon.

The third factor lies in the use of particular teaching methodologies, which are shaped by the object being taught. For Geography, this includes maps, globes, atlases, images, and so on.

The fourth factor is how the discipline manifests in activities conducted across different levels of education, as well as the broader impacts of geographic knowledge learned in school and beyond the school setting.

However, Geography during the imperial period has been framed as a kind of “pre-history” of the discipline that would later be institutionalized with the creation of undergraduate Geography programs at the School of Philosophy, Literature, and Human Sciences at the University of São Paulo in 1934 and at the University of the Federal District in 1935. This perspective led to a mistaken interpretation—that to understand Brazilian Geography, one must first look to its academic foundations, viewing school Geography as merely the vulgarization of a greater knowledge. This is the process Yves Chevallard (1991) termed didactic transposition.

In analyzing research on school Geography and school knowledge, I have again highlighted two issues in need of further attention. One is the process of Geography schooling as a foundation for understanding the history of Geography in Brazil. Yet the studies have generally overlooked the school-



based form of Geography as a meaningful area of investigation, and school knowledge has been judged inferior—hence why it has been widely neglected.

## SCHOOL GEOGRAPHY IN 19TH-CENTURY MINAS GERAIS – RESULTS

This study seeks to demonstrate that Geography “became an academic discipline” through the school system, as argued by Yvor Goodson (1990). The prevailing notion—that understanding Brazilian Geography requires first analyzing its academic science base and treating school Geography as a simplified version of a superior body of knowledge (a process Yves Chevallard [1991] termed didactic transposition)—is considered mistaken in this context. We contend that the school-based version of geographical knowledge was not designed merely to serve a supposedly higher interest stemming from that concept. Rather, geographical knowledge—though still in its formative stage—was already becoming a structured school subject during the 19th century. We also assert that even the academic format of 20th-century university courses in Geography ultimately derived from the school-based version developed in the 19th century.

To answer the question of how geographic knowledge was organized as a school subject during the Empire, we used sources such as tests, exams, student activities, and institutional guidelines from schools in the Province of Minas Gerais. These documents allowed us to identify the educational purposes of this knowledge—purposes that extended beyond simply preparing students for the Empire’s military and professional academies, a requirement already formalized in legislation from 1831. To that end, we investigated the geographic knowledge—or content—present in school curricula, textbooks, exams, and instructional manuals used in schools.

The choice to focus on the province of Minas Gerais was based on two main reasons: first, because it was one of the most important provinces of the 19th century—an influential political center that, despite its prominence, was still expected to submit to the decisions of the Court; and second, because of its history of urban organization. The experience of mining and urban activity, along with the presence of religious seminaries, led me to believe that the presence of Geography in schools in Minas Gerais either coincided with or even predated its presence at Colégio Pedro II. The focus of this research was on the educational purpose of school practice.

We deduced that, since specific content appeared in exams and tests, this material must have, in fact, been taught. Knowledge and practice—two dimensions of the schooling process—are, according to Faria Filho (2002), key components of the educational phenomenon and the foundation of our argument. For the analysis of this school content—defined and developed over time as school-level geographical knowledge, and thus forming the core of geographic science in the 19th century—we selected the following indicators:a) the formation of the planet Earth; b) the real and precise dimensions of the planet;



c) the construction of a repository of information about different places; d) cartography and graphic representation; e) the creation of more accurate charts and maps; f) a rational explanation of the world, in contrast to theological views; g) understanding of power structures and the organization of states through territory; h) soil productivity and the location of natural resources; i) population distribution and composition; j) environmental conditions for recognizing, locating, and distributing species; l) the distribution of natural phenomena. By rejecting the idea of a school subject as mere didactic transposition, we conceive of school subjects as relatively autonomous epistemological entities. We shift emphasis away from external decisions and legitimations, turning instead to the school itself, embedding the knowledge it produces within a school culture (JULIA, 2002). School subjects are shaped within this school culture and have specific goals that are often not reducible to those of their academic counterparts. While we cannot deny that a school discipline may originate from an academic tradition, the concept of reference science or didactic transposition is not the only explanation for the construction of a discipline. In fact, the school context is, in many respects, vastly different from the university context—as was the case for Geography from the 19th century until the 1930s. Goodson (1990) argues: “school subjects are often divorced from their base disciplines or may not even have one” (p. 234). Many school subjects, therefore, precede their supposed parent disciplines.

Studies on school subjects emphasize the particularly creative nature of the school institution, as opposed to the mere simplification of scientific knowledge, as Chevallard (1991) proposed. By emphasizing the school, we bring school subjects—and consequently their content—to the forefront, since content is the core element through which subjects are formed. The concern lies in the idea of vulgarization, which strips school subjects of their autonomous existence by assuming that subject formation is merely the result of combining pedagogical methods with scientific knowledge. Rather than linking the history of disciplines to external categories, Chervel suggests focusing on the school itself to discover “the principles of a specific investigation” (CHERVEL, 1990, p. 184). To understand the development of Geography in Brazil without considering the provinces—and by treating Colégio Pedro II as the sole reference—is to ignore the role played by various Brazilian regions in building national history. For this reason, by choosing the school subject of Geography in the provincial schools—especially those in Minas Gerais, which provided the majority of the research sources—I sought to make a theoretical and methodological effort to connect regional and national contexts. This study, as stated earlier, presents a twofold approach: one based on documentary sources that reflect official orientations, and another based on documents generated from pedagogical practices. The research followed a framework consisting of eight aspects: The presence of the subject in school curricula, analyzing how often Geography appeared in official programs, legislation, and public instruction reports; The terminology used for the subject “Geography” and its descriptors; The topics considered part of

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Geography and how prescribed content appeared in curricula, textbooks, and programs; The weight given to the subject within school timetables; The explicit and implicit objectives of the subject; The discourses that authorized and legitimized it as a school subject; Teacher training, specifically through public service exams and academic theses; Records of school practices, such as exams, evaluations, and other available documentation. Through a critical historiographical review, we outlined an overview of existing studies that contain key interpretations of the history of this subject and that continue to serve as the primary reference for teachers and researchers. In tracing the history of Geography, I aim to show that, despite a vast literature, significant gaps remain. One such gap lies in understanding that the process of Geography schooling is also a process of institutionalization. This reveals the need for updated analysis, incorporating new sources and diverse research theories and methodologies. References found in tests and exams cite textbooks recommended by curricula and manuals intended for school use. This suggests that the subject was not only present in teaching materials but also played an active role in the literate culture of the Empire. We recognize that Geography education was not confined to Colégio Pedro II and that its development did not result from a simple dissemination of academic or scientific knowledge. On the contrary, it was a gradual process of disciplinization in which textbook authors and teachers in primary, normal, and secondary schools played a crucial role. This reflects the importance attributed to national territorial knowledge during that period. The significant number of Brazilian-authored Geography textbooks circulating in the Empire during the second half of the 19th century challenges the notion that Geography education in Brazil depended exclusively on foreign authors. The diffuse body of geographic knowledge was being consolidated into a school subject. I emphasize the interactive nature of the subject. These conclusions stem from an exhaustive and meticulous investigation that not only extends the debate around these questions but also advances a stage in the discussion that has been underway for decades.

In this research, I argue that the school-based version of geographic knowledge was not designed to serve a supposedly higher interest through didactic transposition. Rather, geographic knowledge, even in its formative stages, developed into an organized school discipline during the nineteenth century. I also contend that the academic structure of twentieth-century university geography courses was a consequence of the school-based version established in the previous century.

With this perspective, I examined school geography in terms of the school's own objectives and sought to understand the content and pedagogical methods employed—distinct but interconnected elements. According to André Chervel (1990), methods are internal components of teaching and are thus part of the school's overarching educational mission:



“[...] the entirety of these aims defines the school’s educational function. Only a portion of them requires it to deliver instruction. But this instruction is fully integrated into the educational framework that governs the school system, or the particular branch studied. School subjects lie at the center of this structure. Their function is to place instructional content at the service of educational purposes.” (p. 188)

Therefore, in studying the history of school disciplines, one must analyze their content and methods in light of their “objective aims,” tangible outcomes, and “actual purposes.” To grasp these aims, we needed to analyze laws and decrees, official discourses printed in curricula, study plans, and teaching materials. However, it is Chervel himself who urges us to distinguish between official aims and actual purposes. The school does not merely reproduce external knowledge; it appropriates, transforms, and recreates its own knowledge and culture. In doing so, school subjects come into being.

Following Chervel’s (1990) guidance, I have given special attention to content, considering that it is the specific content of a subject that differentiates it from others and makes it unique in a historical context. As Chervel puts it:

“[...] all disciplines, or nearly all, present themselves as a body of knowledge, endowed with internal logic, structured around specific themes, organized into clearly distinct successive stages, and culminating in a few simple and clear ideas.” (p.203)

Thus, studying the content of a school subject involves more than examining what is explicitly stated; it requires an investigation into the materials produced during the educational process. Once again, Chervel emphasizes the need to consider a combination of variables that constitute the complexity of school subjects. Among these, he includes classroom exercises, which serve a monitoring function, and final exams, which weigh heavily on the development of the subject.

To determine how geographic knowledge was structured as a school discipline in Minas Gerais in the nineteenth century, I sought to identify the educational purposes, as defined by Chervel (1990), of that knowledge. Specifically, I aimed to identify the goals of geography instruction beyond its role in preparing students for entrance exams to the Empire’s academies, as mandated by legislation in 1831. For this purpose, I analyzed the geographic knowledge and content featured in school programs, textbooks, and assessments. The choice of Minas Gerais was due to two key reasons: its significance as one of the leading provinces of the nineteenth century—despite being politically influential, it was treated as subordinate to the imperial court—and its history of urban development. The region’s experience with mining and urban life, along with its religious seminaries, led me to believe that geography’s presence in Minas Gerais schools was either simultaneous with or prior to that in Colégio Pedro II.



## CONCLUSION

Addressing the history of Geography in the Province of Minas Gerais thus entailed repositioning the methodological conceptions behind analyses considered “regional,” in the sense that the whole cannot be fully understood without its parts. This approach broadened the understanding of Geography on a national scale, particularly by challenging long-standing conceptions that portrayed school Geography as a by-product of superior, scientific, and academic knowledge. It also destabilized the notion of Colégio Pedro II as the exclusive and pioneering model of excellence in Geography education.

The results of this theoretical and methodological approach questioned dominant interpretations in the field of the history of school Geography.

The breakthrough occurred by shifting the focus away from external influences and simultaneously combining the analysis of prescriptive frameworks with that of school practices. This allowed us to demonstrate that, in Minas Gerais during the 19th century, Geography occupied a prominent place among school subjects. The frequent presence of the discipline was observed across all educational levels—primary, secondary, and teacher training institutions—as evidenced in the many sources examined: tests and exams, in addition to the legislation that legitimized the educational discourse surrounding Geography. Within the school environment, social recognition of the subject was expressed through the knowledge of Brazilian and world territories. This knowledge became synonymous with Geography.

By analyzing school-generated sources, more precise answers emerged to long-standing questions. Perhaps the most important of these was: what content was actually taught in Geography classes at the end of the 19th century?

The data revealed that there was a strong concern with the Geography of Brazil. However, elementary knowledge of geographic science and broad content on universal geography were not neglected.

Content related specifically to the Province of Minas Gerais was also clearly present, especially in teacher training schools and in primary education.

This research found that, to a large extent, content was selected and organized by the teachers themselves—who were also responsible for writing and producing textbooks. It also confirmed that legislation was not the sole determining factor in teaching practices. In many cases, the law simply formalized what society already demanded. In the case of Geography, for instance, practices were already occurring in schools before they were legally established. The presence of Chorography and Cosmography in school content illustrates this point: long before legislation mandated their teaching, they were already part of school instruction.



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