

## **The UNESCO, the universalization of primary education and curricular reforms in Latin American literacy (1940-1950)**

A Unesco, a universalização da educação primária e as reformas curriculares na alfabetização latino-americana (1940-1950)

La Unesco, la universalización de la educación primaria y las reformas curriculares en la alfabetización latinoamericana (1940-1950)

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### **ABSTRACT**

Based on the theoretical-methodological assumptions of Dialogic Discourse Analysis, this article investigates the action of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in the revision of Latin American primary school curricula between the 1940s and 1950s by correlating a set of primary documentary sources. Starting from an analysis of the effects of World War II on the collective imagination of post-war society and the impacts of the scientific and technological development of the late 20th century, this study aims to situate how literacy became one of the main promises for the social and economic development of Latin American countries. By agreeing on the postulates from UNESCO, countries sought to restructure their curricula so that the “Education,” “Science,” and “Culture” triad would ensure not only their development and modernization, but also its commitment to democracy. Such commitment, ultimately, was deeply associated with reformulation of primary school curricula.

**Keywords:** Unesco; Primary school; Curricular reforms in literacy.

## RESUMO

Ao correlacionar um conjunto de fontes documentais primárias, o artigo investiga, a partir dos pressupostos teórico-metodológicos da Análise Dialógica do Discurso, como ocorreu a atuação da Organização das Nações Unidas para a Educação, a Ciência e a Cultura na revisão dos currículos da escola primária latino-americana entre as décadas de 1940 e 1950. Partindo de uma análise dos efeitos da Segunda Guerra Mundial sob o imaginário coletivo da sociedade do Pós-Guerra, bem como dos impactos do desenvolvimento científico e tecnológico da segunda metade do séc. XX, o texto objetiva situar como a alfabetização se tornou uma das principais promessas para o desenvolvimento social e econômico dos países que, ao pactuarem os postulados oriundos da Unesco, buscaram reestruturar seus currículos de maneira que a tríade educação, ciência e cultura assegurasse não somente desenvolvimento e modernização, mas também compromisso com a democracia, primícia a que, em último grau, a reformulação dos currículos da escola primária procurava atender.

**Palavras-chave:** Unesco; Escola primária; Reformas curriculares na alfabetização.

## RESUMEN

A través de la correlación de un conjunto de fuentes documentales primarias, este artículo investiga, a partir de los supuestos teórico-metodológicos del Análisis Dialógico del Discurso, cómo la Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura en la revisión de la educación primaria latinoamericana currículos entre las décadas de 1940 y 1950. Partiendo de un análisis de los efectos de la Segunda Guerra Mundial en el imaginario colectivo de la sociedad de posguerra, así como de los impactos del desarrollo científico y tecnológico de la segunda mitad del siglo. XX, busca situar cómo la alfabetización se convirtió en una de las principales promesas para el desarrollo social y económico de los países que, coincidiendo con los postulados provenientes de la UNESCO, buscaron reestructurar sus planes de estudio de tal manera que la tríada “educación”, “ciencia” y “cultura” aseguraron no sólo su desarrollo y modernización, sino también su compromiso con la democracia, un primer paso que, en definitiva, la reformulación de los currículos de la escuela primaria buscó dar.

**Palabras clave:** Unesco; Escuela primaria; Reformas curriculares en alfabetización.

## Initial Considerations

This article aims to provide a historical analysis of the recommendations issued by UNESCO and its affiliated organizations—such as the *Bureau International d'Éducation* (BIE)—regarding the promotion of universal compulsory education throughout the 20th century. The recommendations analyzed integrate a broader movement for educational renewal that emerged in the post–World War II period, during which UNESCO played a central role in linking education, development, and the democratization of teaching through curricular policies, a context that helps explain why this study focuses on identifying connections between curricula and both economic and social development.

In the aftermath of the conflict (1939–1945), the reconstruction of education on a global scale became a pressing necessity. UNESCO—the United Nations agency for education, science, and culture—undertook the challenge of fostering peace, security, and international cooperation through educational policy. The humanitarian catastrophe marked by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 added urgency to the development of an educational project grounded in the ideals of solidarity and social justice.

In the 1950s, a substantial portion of the world's population still lacked access to primary education, reinforcing the need to advocate for education as a universal right. In this context, Jaime Torres Bodet, then Chief Executive of UNESCO, declared in a 1951 speech that the lack of primary education for half of humankind constituted not only a social injustice but also an impediment to human development. In line with Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UNESCO began to emphasize not only the need to make primary education both compulsory and free of charge, but also the importance of implementing educational reforms—particularly in the field of school curricula.

This study adopts a documentary research methodology, analyzing texts and documents produced by UNESCO and the BIE, guided by the principles of Dialogical

Discourse Analysis (DDA). Bakhtin (1992, p. 329) argues that the text—whether spoken or written—serves as the primary object of analysis across all fields of the Human Sciences and, more broadly, within any humanist philosophical approach. According to the author, the text “[...] represents an immediate reality (of thought and emotion), the only one capable of generating these disciplines and this kind of thinking. Where there is no text, there is no object of study or of thought.” From this perspective, the text is understood as an utterance: a singular, unrepeatable, and dialogic link within the historical chain of social communication.

As an utterance, the text is always produced at the boundary between consciousnesses—between historical and social subjects—and thus inherently contains counterwords, that is, responses to the utterances of others. This approach requires an understanding of the text as the expression of a situated subject, engaged in dialogue with other texts and discourses within a specific social and ideological context.

Accordingly, we maintain that documentary research guided by DDA necessitates studying the text in relation to the context in which it was produced. As Bakhtin (2003) affirms, the extraverbal context does not act externally or mechanically upon the utterance; rather, it constitutes it from within, becoming part of its semantic structure. In other words, to understand a text, one must consider not only the author’s intended meanings but also the social, ideological, and interpretive horizons surrounding it—including those of the researcher conducting the analysis.

## Universalization of Compulsory Schooling

To understand the trajectory of international advocacy for education as a right, it is necessary to examine initiatives that predate the very creation of UNESCO. Indeed, even before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights established the obligation of basic or elementary education, this principle had already been addressed by the *Bureau International d’Éducation* through Recommendation No. 1, adopted at the Third International Conference on Public Instruction, held in Geneva in 1934. Convened by the BIE, such conferences played a significant role in shaping the

direction of education at the international level. It is worth noting that the BIE was founded in Geneva in 1925 as a private, nongovernmental organization with support from the *Institut Universitaire des Sciences de l'Éducation* and was granted public-interest status in 1929.

It must also be noted that Jean Piaget served as Director of the BIE from 1929 to 1968. According to Loureiro and Assis (2018), Édouard Claparède's invitation to Piaget to join the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute (IJJR) and the BIE was prompted by a publication by Piaget in the journal *Archives de Psychologie*. The mission of the BIE was to "[...] develop studies of a strictly scientific nature and of political, philosophical, religious, and nationalist neutrality to promote peace and international cooperation through education, grounded in dialogue among nations" (Loureiro & Assis, 2018, p. 260).

The international recognition attained by the BIE in the first half of the twentieth century enabled the institution to convene, from at least 1934 onward, regular annual meetings organized by the Swiss government, with the participation of up to 60 countries. These meetings were suspended in 1939 due to the outbreak of World War II and resumed in 1946. In 1947, still under Piaget's leadership, the BIE signed a cooperation agreement with UNESCO, and "[...] a joint commission was established to lay the foundation of this cooperation" (Brasil, 1965, p. XII). From that point forward, the conferences began to be co-organized with UNESCO, and since 1969, the Institute has been an integral part of the Organization, while retaining its intellectual and functional autonomy.

In its 1934 Recommendation No. 1, the BIE noted that the number of years of compulsory education varied significantly across countries. This variation resulted from the absence, at the time, of a universally applicable model, due largely to wide disparities in national conditions—particularly in terms of financial resources. In many countries, there were not enough schools to accommodate all school-age children. Therefore, the Recommendation asserted that the primary concern should not be to extend the duration of compulsory education, but rather to ensure that children completed a minimum number of school years, in accordance with each country's

specific circumstances. In this regard, the Recommendation proposed that seven years of schooling constituted a desirable minimum and that school entry age should be based on children's physical, intellectual, and moral development (Brasil, 1965).

The document also advised governments on the importance of adopting the principle of compulsory education and establishing sanctions for noncompliance, as well as evaluating situations that might justify temporary exemptions from these requirements. Although the extension of compulsory schooling was addressed in Recommendation No. 1, the concept of universalization—as later enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—was only introduced in Recommendation No. 32, adopted at the Fourteenth International Conference on Public Instruction, jointly organized by UNESCO and the BIE and held in Geneva in July 1951, with the participation of 49 UNESCO member states.

To ensure the right to education for all, the central theme of the Recommendation (1951) was the formulation of national education plans to be developed by each government. Accordingly, the document emphasized that these plans should include provisions for organizing and financing educational initiatives; determining the duration of compulsory schooling; establishing incentives and sanctions; addressing the pedagogical aspects of compulsory education; training teachers; improving school infrastructure; and expanding compulsory education (Brasil, 1965). The core objective of Recommendation No. 32 was thus the development of plans aimed at achieving the universalization of compulsory education, which UNESCO (1952) viewed as the “remedy” to address the problem of global illiteracy.

Recommendation No. 32 also addressed the role of international organizations and, in this context, urged UNESCO member states to prioritize technical assistance projects to support countries in developing such plans to achieve universal compulsory education. The impact of the resolutions from the Fourteenth International Conference on Public Instruction is evident in the document *La Unesco y su programa: el derecho a la educación* (UNESCO, 1952), which, when referencing Recommendation No. 32, described it as a genuine global program for the universalization of compulsory

schooling and, according to its authors, the solution to combat illiteracy. After all, how could one speak of human solidarity without ensuring a shared foundation of knowledge historically built by humankind and made accessible to all peoples?

In the 1952 document, UNESCO reiterated the guidelines laid out in Recommendation No. 32, providing frameworks to support countries in constructing their own national education plans. Among other provisions, national plans for the universalization of compulsory schooling should: target both boys and girls and include immediate and progressive implementation over a clearly defined number of years; be preceded by studies that quantify the school-age population and project future enrollment; be aligned with national strategies for economic and social reform and development; remain flexible to allow for adjustments and improvements throughout implementation; and be widely publicized to raise awareness of their importance for individuals and for society at large.

The publication emphasized that the length of compulsory education should not be short, particularly in countries facing linguistic challenges (UNESCO, 1952). It also cautioned against reducing the number of compulsory school years for financial reasons, especially in countries where many children still lacked access to education. In such countries, compulsory schooling could be extended to seven or eight years. This determination, however, was to be established jointly by public education and labor authorities.

Exemptions from compulsory education due to illness or physical or mental disability were to be either eliminated or thoroughly justified. Additionally, periodic registration of school-age children in each locality was recommended, as well as close cooperation between families and schools. Primary education was not to be considered free solely by virtue of waiving tuition fees; it should also include school supplies, as stipulated in Recommendation No. 21, approved at the Tenth International Conference on Public Instruction, and, according to UNESCO (1952), should gradually include school textbooks. With regard to pedagogical aspects, it is worth highlighting the underlying assumption that schools should be integrated into their communities,



becoming “[...] one of the elements of social, economic, civic, artistic, and cultural progress” (Brasil, 1965, p. 58).

Also concerning pedagogical issues, Recommendation No. 32 emphasizes that the academic calendar should take into account the climatic and labor factors specific to each season. Schools were encouraged to operate in two shifts; however, a single shift could be authorized in cases where limited infrastructure, teacher shortages, or specific social and economic conditions made it more appropriate. According to UNESCO (1952), the effectiveness of national education plans would depend largely on the role of teachers; however, the global teacher shortage was recognized as a major barrier to the universalization of compulsory schooling. Thus, in the 1950s, efforts to universalize education also required significant investments in teacher training programs.

Accordingly, a major effort was required to improve teachers’ salaries, guarantee job stability, and establish a sufficient number of teacher training centers. In urgent situations, accelerated training could be permitted, provided that future professional development was planned. Nonetheless, according to Recommendation No. 32, training through traditional teacher education colleges remained the preferred approach, as it enabled a higher degree of professionalization. If primary education was to become compulsory and accessible to all children, it was first necessary to examine what was being taught and how, in order to propose reforms aligned with UNESCO’s objectives—from teacher preparation to curriculum restructuring.

## Curricular Reforms in the 1950s

The universalization and compulsory nature of primary education were considered essential prerequisites for ensuring the right to education. However, it was still necessary to carry out educational reforms that primarily addressed the needs of economic and social development. The global educational reforms initiated in the aftermath of the World War II focused primarily on revising primary school curricula. In this regard, it is important to consider a study published by UNESCO in 1958 titled *Curriculum: revision and research*, whose stated objectives were to present the



procedures adopted by twenty countries in revising their curricula, to encourage other nations to undertake similar initiatives, and to support educational authorities engaged in such efforts. This perspective made it possible to learn from the experiences of other countries while also relying on UNESCO's institutional support to implement changes deemed necessary on a global scale.

At the time, UNESCO recognized a universal demand for educational reform. Thus, despite national differences, the Organization asserted that all reforms shared a common goal: to expand educational services to most of the school-age population; reduce early school dropout rates; improve the quality of education by adapting it to students' characteristics and abilities; and align educational goals and curricula with the demands of modern society and, consequently, with the imperatives of economic and social development.

Among the factors identified as drivers of curriculum reform were: changes in social life brought about by the development and application of scientific knowledge; evolving educational goals; improved understanding of how children learn, informed by advances in Psychology, Biology, and Education; the expansion of democratic and human rights principles to include all citizens regardless of race, color, sex, religion, political affiliation, or socioeconomic status; and, lastly, the orientation of education as a cornerstone of economic development.

From UNESCO's (1958) standpoint, the traditional notion of curriculum—as a list of subjects to be memorized by students—was being replaced by a broader understanding that encompassed all school-based activities, experiences, teaching methods, and instructional tools used by educators to achieve learning objectives.

In this regard, the 1958 document highlights a variety of trends in curriculum reform planning, among which we emphasize the following: orienting primary education toward meeting children's needs without diminishing its role in preparing them for further studies; incorporating into the concept of learning not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills but also learning how to learn, how to behave, and how to act in ways that promote the well-being of others and personal fulfillment; recognizing cultural, moral, and spiritual values as well as socioeconomic conditions;

including only essential content in the curriculum, eliminating elements that caused excessive workload and fatigue for both students and teachers; and revising traditional assessment methods by proposing more functional approaches that considered both the full development of the child's personality and mastery of the subject matter.

UNESCO thus understood that there was no single path for the curriculum revision process, but rather distinct approaches grounded in different conceptions of education, childhood, and learning, which could coexist within the same region of the world or even within a single country. In 1947, the Organization defined the “most underdeveloped zones” of the world as follows: the Far East; the Middle East and Islamic countries; Tropical Africa; Latin America; and the West Indies (UNESCO, 1947, p. 126). Within this context, Latin America “set forth an agenda centered on the issue of ‘underdevelopment’ and the challenge of developing and ‘modernizing’ its national societies and economies” (Fiori, 2020, p. 3).

The Latin American case exemplified UNESCO's global outlook, as the region—no longer under colonial rule—emerged in the immediate postwar period as one of the areas of greatest interest to international organizations promoting democratic values and economic and social progress. From the perspective of the international community, the countries of Latin America shared common traits, including their location in the Western Hemisphere and the linguistic origins of their national languages (Bethell, 2009; Bulmer-Thomas, 2003; Hartlyn & Valenzuela, 1998). From a local perspective, however, their shared colonial experience played a central role in constructing a “common past” that unified Latin American peoples. As we will see, this perspective influenced how primary school curricula were shaped in the region—particularly in the teaching of History and native languages.

UNESCO (1958) reiterates in the document that improvements in education could be achieved through the participation of parents, teachers, laypeople, and educational professionals and technicians in the curriculum revision process. On the other hand, its effectiveness depended on understanding how children develop and learn, as well as on grasping the needs of modern society. Nevertheless, as UNESCO acknowledged, some critics questioned the extent to which scientific knowledge could

meaningfully inform teaching practice and curriculum development. On one side were those who believed that teaching is an art; on the other, those who viewed the classroom as a social environment influenced by various factors, where learning was shaped by elements beyond the reach of curricular frameworks.

In response to these positions, UNESCO emphasized that even in the realm of art, there is a place for science, and that educational research—particularly curriculum research—was not limited to empirical or experimental studies based on measurement and evaluation, but also encompassed studies aimed at reinterpreting known facts. In this sense, curriculum research was conceived as a form of critical reflection on experience and on the new meanings such reflection might produce.

## **Curricula in Latin America**

In the specific case of Latin America, UNESCO developed initiatives aimed at understanding the regional particularities of educational systems, particularly with regard to primary school curricula. The Final Report of the Seminar on Plans and Curricula for Primary Education, organized by UNESCO in Peru in 1956, offers insight into the evolution of curricula in the region. The first section of the Recommendations approved at the Seminar refers to the main stages in the development of educational systems, noting that, from a historical perspective, the curricula adopted in Latin American countries followed a similar trajectory, given that the region had been “[...] explored and colonized by Spaniards and Portuguese” (UNESCO, 1961, p. 45).

With the advent of republican regimes, as noted in the Recommendations, efforts were made to create an indigenous culture with its own educational norms, aimed at providing the Latin American people with a cultural identity—particularly through the teaching of native languages. In other words, there was an attempt to break away from the educational system of the colonial era; however, the essential characteristics of the curricula adopted up to that point persisted until the mid-nineteenth century (UNESCO, 1961, p. 46). Despite this, two distinct trends emerged:

On the one hand, the goal of forming citizens for the Republic led to the expansion of curricula to include subjects such as national language, arithmetic, civics and civility, religion, geography, history, and cosmography. On the other hand, there was a growing concern with the universalization of primary education as the foundation for exercising democratic rights (UNESCO, 1961, p. 45).

In the early twentieth century, these changes began to take effect, and legal frameworks were introduced to structure curricula, which increasingly emphasized civic education. Curricular programs began to move away from encyclopedic reading texts and toward greater subject specificity—although still in a rudimentary form (UNESCO, 1961, p. 46). The final stage in this evolution was marked by government commitments to provide all school-age children with free primary education. This commitment was grounded in “[...] the belief that educating children according to appropriate curricula is the most effective way to produce citizens capable of building a prosperous and happy nation” (UNESCO, 1961, p. 47), a core promise of republican governance.

In 1957, UNESCO published a study titled *Los programas de enseñanza primaria en América Latina*, authored by Lourenço Filho. As stated in the Preface, the study was prepared at the request of UNESCO’s Secretariat to be presented at the Regional Conference on Free and Compulsory Education in Latin America, organized by the agency in collaboration with the Organization of American States (OAS) and held in Lima, Peru. It was also made available to participants of the Conference of Ministers of Education of Latin America, convened by the OAS and held in the same city from May 3 to 5, 1956, and was further used as a working document for the Seminar on Plans and Curricula for Basic Education in Latin America, held in Humpan from May 9 to 22, 1956.

UNESCO sought to widely disseminate the study prepared by Lourenço Filho, as it could, first and foremost, serve as a reference for countries interested in engaging with the Organization—particularly with regard to guidance on expanding primary education and improving curricula. The long-term project to expand primary education, as documented in the study conducted by Lourenço Filho (1957), was thus intended

to assist UNESCO member states in planning education, particularly with regard to teacher training and the preparation of curriculum specialists.

By presenting a comparative analysis of primary education curricula adopted across Latin America, the study became a key instrument for advancing regionally coordinated efforts in line with UNESCO's educational principles. The study also allowed educators from the region and other parts of the world to gain an initial overview of the state of education in Latin America, which, according to the Preface, was designated to receive a special educational initiative following a decision made at UNESCO's General Conference held in New Delhi in November 1956.

According to Lourenço Filho (1957), the purpose of the study was to identify similarities and differences among the programs adopted and to assess whether they reflected the economic and social development needs of the contexts in which they were implemented. In line with its objectives, the report was structured into two sections. Our focus turned to the first section, which presents the teaching programs, emphasizing the content taught in the initial stages of schooling. It is important to note that the data analyzed by the author had been collected in earlier years, between 1942 and 1955, and were provided by UNESCO's Secretariat.

We selected specific aspects of the report to better understand the types of knowledge and subject matter being taught in Latin American primary schools. Thus, with regard to the authority responsible for organizing the programs, it is important to first highlight that, with the exception of Brazil, the programs were standardized in the other countries. Accordingly, the report presents elements that allow us to identify the duration of primary education and the subjects included in the curricula. Lourenço Filho (1957) notes that in the educational plans and programs of Spanish-speaking countries, the terminology used is *disciplinas* (subjects) or *matérias* (matters).

In Brazil, however, curricular components were referred to as *disciplinas* (subjects). Accordingly, the author chose to use the term "subject" in his report to denote the area of study or educational practice included in the curricula, and the term *matéria* to refer to the full body of content covered within each subject. Thus, based on the data from the study, we constructed Chart 1, which outlines the situation of each

Latin American country in terms of the duration of primary education, its stages, and the subjects included in the first-grade curricula:

Chart 1 – Overview of Latin American countries in terms of primary education duration

Country	Duration	Steps	Subjects Covered in First-Grade Curricula
Argentina	7 or 6 years for all schools	Lower and upper levels	Aritmética (Arithmetic); Geometria (Geometry); Gramática (Grammar), which includes reading and writing; Geografia (Geography); História (History); Educação Cívica (Civic Education); Natureza (Natural Sciences); Poupança e Provisão (Personal Finances); Música (Music); Desenho (Artistic Education/Drawings); Trabalhos Manuais e Ginástica (Manual Work and Gymnastics)
Bolivia	6 years in urban schools	-	Leitura (Reading); Recitação (Recitation); Aritmética (Arithmetic); Geografia (Geography); Moral e Cidadania (Moral and Civic Education); Ciências Naturais e Físicas (Natural and Physical Sciences); Música (Music); Ginástica (Physical Education/Gymnastics); Exercícios de Gramática (Grammar Practice)
Brazil	5 years	Elementary and Complementar y	Leitura e Gramática, Iniciação à Matemática, Geografia e História do Brasil (Reading and Grammar, Introduction to Mathematics, Geography, and Brazilian History); Conhecimentos Gerais Aplicados à Vida Social e Educação para a Higiene e o Trabalho (General Knowledge Applied to Social Life, Hygiene, and Work Education); Desenho e Artesanato (Artistic Education/Drawings and Handcrafts); Cantando Coral (Choral Singing); Educação Física (Physical Education).
Chile	6 years in urban schools	-	Educação Física (Physical Education); Castelhana (Spanish); Matemática (Math); Ciências Naturais (Natural Sciences); Ciências Sociais (Social Sciences), which includes History and Geography; Artesanato Educacional (Handcraft Education); Trabalhos Práticos Domésticos (Household Chores); Atividades Agrícolas (Agricultural Activities); Artes Plásticas (Visual Arts); Caligrafia (Handwriting); Música e Canção (Musical Education); Religião e Moral (Religious and Moral Education)
Colombia	5 years in urban schools	-	Religião e História Sagrada (Religion and Religious History); Leitura e Escritura (Reading and Writing); Urbanidade (Courteousness); Educação Cívica e Higiênica (Civic Education and Hygiene); Cantando (Singing); Desenho (Artistic Education/Drawings); Trabalho Manual e Práticas Agrícolas (Manual Work and Agricultural Practices); Educação Física (Physical Education); Aritmética (Arithmetic); and Noções de História e Geografia (Introduction to History and Geography)



Country	Duration	Steps	Subjects Covered in First-Grade Curricula
Costa Rica	6 years	-	Matemática (Math); Estudo da Natureza (Natural Sciences); Geografia e História (Geography and History); Língua Materna (Native Language); Educação Física (Physical Education); Trabalhos Manuais (Manual Work); Educação Agrícola e Industrial (Agricultural and Industrial Education); Música e Religião (Music and Religious Education)
Cuba	6 years	Split into two cycles of 3 years	Leitura (Reading); Escrita (Writing); Gramática (Grammar); Estudo da Natureza (Natural Sciences); Aritmética (Arithmetic); Desenho (Artistic Education/Drawings); Trabalhos Manuais (Manual Work); Educação Moral e Cívica (Moral and Civic Education); Educação física (Physical Education); Educação Musical (Musical Education)
Ecuador	6 years	Split into 3 stages of 2 years	Língua Nacional (National Language); Matemática (Math); Educação para a Vida Social e Cívica (Education for Social and Civic Life), including Geography and History; Ciências Naturais (Natural Sciences); Higiene (Hygiene); Atividades Artísticas e Manuais (Handcraft and Artistic Activities); Educação Doméstica (Family Life Education)
Guatemala	6 years	-	Gramática (Grammar); Estudo da Natureza (Natural Sciences); Estudos Sociais (Social Studies); Matemática (Math); Práticas Agrícolas (Agricultural Practices); Trabalhos Manuais (Manual Work); Educação física (Physical Education); Educação Estética (Beauty and Aesthetics)
Haiti	6 years	Split into 3 cycles of 2 years	Leitura, Escrita e Língua francesa (Reading, Writing and French); Calculus e Geometria (Calculus and Geometry); Instrução Religiosa (Religious Education); Desenho (Artistic Education/Drawings); Geografia e História (Geography and History) (History); Trabalho Manual e Educação Física (Manual Work and Physical Education); Educação Moral (Moral Education)
Honduras	6 years in urban schools	-	Educação Física (Physical Education); Castelhan (Spanish); Matemática (Math); Ciências Naturais (Natural Sciences) Estudos Sociais (Social Studies); Artes Industriais (Industrial Arts); Educação em Casa (Home Education); Trabalho Agrícola (Agricultural Work); Artes Plásticas (Visual Arts); Música e Canto (Music and Singing)
Peru	5 years	Split into 2 cycles	História Natural (Natural History); Vida Social (Social Life); Cálculo (Calculus); Gramática e Outros Meios de Expressão (Grammar and Other Means of Communication); Cursos Especiais (Special Courses); Educação Moral e Religiosa (Moral and Religious Education); Educação física (Physical Education)
Dominican Republic	5 years	-	Língua Espanhola (Spanish); Matemática (Math); Estudo da Natureza (Natural Sciences); Religião (Religious Education); Atividades Artísticas, Manuais e Esportivas (Artistic, Manual and Sport Activities);



Country	Duration	Steps	Subjects Covered in First-Grade Curricula
			Práticas de Civilidade e Higiene (Civic and Hygiene Practices)
El Salvador	6 years	Split into 3 cycles of 2 years	Língua Nacional (National Language); Matemática (Math); Estudo da Natureza (Natural Sciences); Estudos Sociais (Social Studies); Canto e Música (Singing and Music); Educação Física (Physical Education); Artes e Ofícios (Arts and Crafts)
Uruguay	6 years in urban schools	-	Aritmética (Arithmetic) e Geometria (Geometry); Língua Nacional (National Language); Desenho (Artistic Education/Drawings); Escrita (Writing); Trabalhos Manuais (Manual Work); Cantando (Singing)
Venezuela	6 years	-	Gramática (Grammar); Matemática e Cálculos Elementares (Math and Elementary Calculus); Ciências da Natureza (Natural Sciences); Higiene (Hygiene); Educação Física (Physical Education); Educação Manual e Estética (Manual Work and Beauty Education)

Source: Prepared by the authors (2023), based on Lourenço Filho (1957).

It can be observed that the duration of primary education varied: while most countries offered six years, this number could differ depending on whether the school was in an urban or rural area. In Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Haiti, Peru, and El Salvador, primary education was structured into cycles. The subjects were quite diverse, with a notable emphasis on Manual Work, which suggests that from the first year onward, primary education was expected to include subjects connected to preparation for work and professional life. It is also worth noting that, alongside subjects related to Native Language instruction and Arithmetic, there was a consistent inclusion of History, Geography, Morals, and Civics, revealing a degree of standardization across countries in the region regarding what was considered essential for Civic Education.

Regarding the stated goals of the teaching programs, Lourenço Filho (1957) points out that in the introductory chapters of documents from 13 countries, the general aims of primary education were outlined, with an emphasis on political and social dimensions as well as economic issues. Only in the programs from Brazil, Haiti, Nicaragua, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Venezuela were the objectives not explicitly stated. With respect to the sequencing of subject objectives,

the author reports on findings from seven countries, noting that the progression was very similar in most cases. Accordingly, and based on the study, we present the progression in the first and second years of instruction in oral language, reading, and writing in Chart 2.

Chart2 — Native Language: Progression of Subjects in the 1st and 2nd Years

	Argentina		Bolivia		Chile		Costa Rica		Mexico		El Salvador		Uruguay	
	Lo wer	Up per	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>
<b>Oral Languages</b>														
Speaking	x		x		x		x		x		x		x	
Image description			x		x				x		x			x
Recitation	x		x		x		x		x		x			x
Following commands				x	x		x			x			x	
<b>Reading and Writing</b>														
Reading words and sentences	x		x		x		x		x		x		x	
Divide words into syllables	x		x		x		x							
Uppercase and lowercase letters		x	x		x				x		x		x	
Vowels and consonants		x				x		x		x	x			x
Essential punctuation	x		x			x		x	x		x			x
Completing sayings	x			x	x					x			x	
Semi-fluent reading		x	x				x			x	x		x	
Fluent reading		x				x		x				x		x
Introduction to silent reading				x	x				x		x		x	
Sentence dictation				x	x			x		x				
Basic writing exercises		x				x		x		x		x		x
Grammar	x				x		x			x	x			x
Nouns: gender and number				x		x			x				x	
Introduction to spelling					x					x				x
Identifying nouns, qualities and actions	x				x				x					x

Source: Adapted by the authors (2023), based on Lourenço Filho (1957).

The progression outlined by Lourenço Filho allows us to infer that the curricula of schools in the Latin American countries listed in Chart 2 consisted of two subjects: *Oral Language* and *Reading and Writing*. The subjects were designed to develop oral

language skills and support the acquisition of knowledge related to reading and writing. It is important to note that the subjects included instruction on vowels and consonants, syllables, words and sentences, composition, and grammatical and orthographic aspects.

According to the study's author, the teaching programs recommended, prescribed, and even prohibited certain methods for teaching reading skills. The programs in Chile, Costa Rica, Honduras, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Venezuela advocated for the use of the Decroly or global method. In contrast, the other countries explicitly prescribed the use of the "word method" (based on common words) or the keyword method. The programs in Nicaragua and some Brazilian states allowed teachers to choose the method but prohibited the use of the alphabetic method. The program in Haiti recommended the use of a mixed method. At the end of the first part of the study, Lourenço Filho (1957) concluded, based on the results, that the programs across Latin America had more similarities than differences. According to the author, these similarities could be explained not only by the "identical" cultural origin of the countries but also by factors related to teacher training and the preparation of education specialists.

Another aspect he highlights is the fact that the first models of educational institutions in Latin America were introduced by Catholic religious orders (Dominicans, Jesuits, and Franciscans) prior to the sixteenth century. After the former colonies gained independence, the earliest efforts to establish public education institutions followed the models left by the religious orders, which were later adapted to emulate European systems, particularly those of France. In Brazil, according to Lourenço Filho (1957), the reform implemented by Minister François Guizot<sup>1</sup> in 1833 in France inspired most of the provincial school systems. Later, influences from the United States began to emerge. Such influences, which the author considered part of the broader New School movement, became more pronounced after World War I and blended with other European influences.

This vision spread throughout several Latin American countries by means of experimental schools, educational research institutes, and the circulation of a

significant body of translated works and original publications by Latin American authors. The Pan American Union launched a series of specialized publications and, with the cooperation of UNESCO, brought together educational administrators and pedagogues through congresses, conferences, and seminars. With support from UNESCO, several institutions were established, including *Centro Regional de Educación Fundamental para la América Latina* (CREFAL), *Editorial Latinoamericana de Educación Fundamental*, and *Escuela Normal Interamericana*. All these initiatives, along with other actions undertaken by UNESCO, helped the author explain the similarities observed among primary school curricula across the Latin American region.

Lourenço Filho (1957) further acknowledges that the programs were influenced by the work carried out at seminars held in Caracas (1949), Rio de Janeiro (1949), and Montevideo (1950). All of the meetings addressed rural education, basic education, and primary education. At the final seminar, recommendations for primary education programs were developed and summarized by the author as follows: “a) ‘activity’ as the foundation of educational work; b) ‘globalization’ as a normative criterion; and c) ‘knowledge’ turned into technique, criterion, and behavior, as objectives” (Lourenço Filho, 1957, p. 27).

Thus, we can conclude that the promotion of compulsory primary schooling was accompanied by UNESCO’s efforts to understand the curricula in place across Latin American countries. This process highlights the Organization’s interest in the curricular foundations of reading and writing instruction in the early years of schooling, as well as in the literacy methods to be adopted by teachers. Analyzed within the context of the postwar period, the studies—alongside the participation of these countries in various events convened by UNESCO—reveal an effort to promote regional integration aimed at increasing the region’s visibility on the international stage, insofar as the standardization of education in the early years of schooling was expected to improve literacy rates and, consequently, raise the region’s level of social development, which was often viewed as “underdeveloped” yet rich in primary education universalization initiatives.

## Final Considerations

The traumatic experience of World War II gave rise to solidarity movements that, during the 1940s and 1950s, coalesced around the UN and its specialized agencies. The pain and suffering caused by the loss of human life—particularly following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945—led the Organization to confront a core concern: how could the momentum of modern science be prevented from once again steering humanity toward barbarism? It was necessary to rebuild the torn human fabric through an educational project that was intended to be universal, free, and compulsory, as guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

Without losing sight of this primary objective, UNESCO launched a global movement in the form of programs and initiatives aimed at the universalization of compulsory schooling, with a specific focus on primary education. To this end, it relied on the very foundations of modern science, conducting situational studies to produce data on the general state of primary education, especially in the world's most “underdeveloped” regions, and identifying Latin America as a starting point for a broader project of curricular reform. Curriculum reform thus became a central strategy for shaping the minds of those who could promote democratic ideals, national modernization, and social development—objectives that, in theory, would help avert a new “age of catastrophe” in the already turbulent twentieth century.

By promoting primary education as the first stage in achieving these goals, UNESCO and its main partners, including the BIE, placed on literacy the promise that expanding access to elementary education would allow the world to take its first steps toward the human development objectives set forth in the United Nations Charter (1945). Reforms to Latin American school curricula therefore included the establishment of seven years as the desirable minimum duration of schooling for children in the literacy phase; the need to uphold the principle of compulsory education; the prioritization of formal teacher training; and the integration of education and science across all levels of schooling.

Although UNESCO advocated that there were no ready-made models for reorganizing school curricula, it upheld the notion that children must be given the conditions to learn how to learn, learn how to behave, and learn how to act for the well-being of others and for their own personal fulfillment—ultimately acting as a singular agent in shaping national curricula in Latin America. In turn, by unanimously structuring their curricula to prioritize oral language as well as reading and writing, the region's educational systems reinforced the belief that literacy was the most effective means of forming citizens capable of building a modern, compassionate, prosperous, and happy nation aligned with the pacifist, technoscientific worldview that emerged at the end of World War II.

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## Note

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- <sup>1</sup> Guizot became France's Minister of Public Instruction in 1832 and began reorganizing the country's school system (Weiss, 2001, p. 58).