

Teaching controversial historical issues in Brazil's polarized sociopolitical context: a case study  
of two history teachers' conceptualization of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse and its impact on  
their practice

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## Abstract

In Brazil, since the early 2000s, a movement called *Escola Sem Partido* has campaigned against the alleged widespread ideological indoctrination they claimed was taking place in schools, and, based on this claim, they have advocated for certain restrictions on teachers' liberties to teach. Studies have demonstrated that history teachers are particularly negatively affected by the circulation of such ideas due to the subject's inherently political nature, and often controversial content. Based on a theoretical framework that combines critical pedagogy, historical consciousness, and discourse analysis, I conducted a two-part, qualitative study that analyzed *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse. In addition, I examined the cases of two high school history teachers, focussing my lens on how the two teachers mobilize their understanding of history and education to conceptualize and resist the impact of the movement's discourse on how they teach controversial historical issues. My analysis of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse reveals attempts to both constitute teachers as indoctrinators, and to regulate what is both permissible and what is not in history classes. My analysis of the history teachers' views and statements – gathered through interviews and journal entries and adopting Zanzanian's methodology for examining historical consciousness through history-as-interpretive-filters – suggests that the teachers' understanding of history impacts both their positioning and attitudes of resistance to the movement's discourse. Teaching controversial topics within the context of the influence of the movement's discourse, the teacher-participants associate a perceived change in social appreciation for their work, and they feel the pressure to self-censor. However, they differed in the ways in which they both minimized these impacts on their practice, and conceived resistance to it. This study provides contextualized discussions about teachers' experiences that can contribute to our knowledge about how teachers' understanding of history might influence their practice in adverse contexts.

## Résumé

Depuis le début des années 2000 au Brésil, le mouvement *Escola Sem Partido* fait campagne contre le prétendu endoctrinement idéologique généralisé dans les écoles. Il plaide pour des restrictions à la liberté d'enseigner des enseignants. Des études ont démontré que les professeurs d'histoire sont particulièrement touchés par la circulation de telles idées, en raison du contenu politique et souvent controversé de leur matière. En mobilisant un cadre théorique qui combine pédagogie critique, conscience historique et analyse de discours, j'ai mené une étude qualitative en deux parties. Dans un premier temps, j'ai analysé le discours d'*Escola Sem Partido*; j'ai ensuite examiné le cas de deux professeurs d'histoire du secondaire. Je me suis concentrée sur la manière dont les enseignants mobilisent leur compréhension de l'histoire et de l'éducation pour conceptualiser et résister à l'impact du discours du mouvement, dans la manière dont ils enseignent des questions historiques controversées. L'analyse des textes de l'*Escola Sem Partido* révèle des tentatives de présenter les enseignants comme endoctrineurs, et de réglementer ce qui est considéré comme répréhensible dans les cours d'histoire. L'analyse des témoignages de deux professeurs d'histoire utilisant la méthodologie de Zanzanian pour examiner la conscience historique à travers l'histoire-comme-filtres-d'interprétation suggère que la compréhension des enseignants de l'histoire a un impact sur leur positionnement et leurs attitudes de résistance au discours du mouvement. Lors de l'enseignement de sujets controversés, les participants perçoivent un changement dans l'appréciation sociale de leur travail, qu'ils associent à la pression de l'autocensure. Cependant, les participants minimisent ces impacts sur leur pratique et conçoivent différemment la résistance à celle-ci. Cette étude fournit des discussions contextualisées sur les expériences des enseignants. Celles-ci peuvent contribuer à comprendre la manière dont la compréhension de l'histoire par les enseignants peut influencer leur pratique dans des contextes défavorables.

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### **Contribution of Authors**

This study was conducted and written by me, Thais Cattani Perroni, under the supervision of Dr. Paul Zanzanian. I designed the research project under the guidance of Dr. Zanzanian. I collected and analyzed the data, and I wrote all chapters of this thesis. Dr. Zanzanian provided feedback for every phase of this study. The revisions and editing to the writing were carried out in partnership with him.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1 Background and Context of The Problem Under Investigation

The research topic for this thesis arose from identifying a feeling of dread that was affecting me in my everyday life. I started my undergraduate studies in 2016 with the goal of becoming a history teacher in Brazil during one of the most politically turbulent periods in recent Brazilian history<sup>1</sup>. Due to the increasingly negative social and educational context in which I was studying, there were many times when I thought of giving up on a career as a teacher in Brazil. I felt overwhelmed by the rising offensive from the government and civil society directed at public education, as well as the increase in the circulation of discourses directed against teachers, particularly history teachers, which challenged their freedom to teach history in a critical manner.

This feeling of dread, which came from the necessity of having to forge my professional identity during such troubled times, was a prime motivation in wanting to understand how more experienced history teachers were rationalizing and navigating the impact of Brazil's new sociopolitical context on their teaching practice. The immediate context I am referring to is the rise of a controversial educational discourse linked with, and supported by, right-wing and far-right politicians and civic movements. The exponent of this discourse is the *Escola Sem Partido* movement, which has advocated for restrictions on teachers' liberties to teach since the early 2000s. The movement's discourse gained national relevance in the late 2010s, as part of a general backlash from right-wing political groups against what they perceived as the pervasiveness of leftist indoctrination in schools.

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<sup>1</sup> 2016 was marked both by the troubled impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, which many considered a political coup, and by a great political advance of the agenda of the Brazilian elite and far-right political organizations.



“*Escola Sem Partido*”, (literally translated as ‘Partyless School’, meaning a school devoid of political content and any political party’s agenda), has encouraged students and parents to surveil teachers and denounce those who are allegedly spreading leftist propaganda in class. The leaders of this campaign argue that most of what is being taught in schools is comprised, in fact, of leftist ideological indoctrination. According to the educational researcher Fernanda Moura (2016), history teachers, along with sociology teachers, are the main targets of direct surveillance and derogatory treatment directed by the movement’s supporters; this is because the curriculum of such disciplines covers political subjects and controversies, often of an historical character, which supporters of *Escola Sem Partido* in turn characterize as indoctrination.

To introduce this thesis, I provide a general overview of the (historical) context of history teaching in Brazil, and then I introduce the specific challenges that *Escola Sem Partido* pose to history teachers. In the following sub-sections, I elaborate on these themes to situate the reader in the context of this master’s thesis.

### *1.1.2 Definitions and context: an overview of the history of history teaching in Brazil*

This section presents an overview of how history has been taught in Brazil since it became a school subject in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. My intent is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of the history of history teaching in this country, but rather to contextualize the main changes and continuities in history education throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries in Brazil.

History has a troubled record as a school subject in Brazil. It first appeared in school curricula in the 1830s, shortly after the country’s independence, and right from the outset, it assumed the role of helping to forge the idea of the nation for Brazilian students (Bittencourt, 2018; Nadai, 1993). During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a traditionalist methodology focused on factual retelling, and the diffusion of nationalist ideas embedded in this retelling was the norm

(Mathias, 2011; Nadai, 1993; Schmidt, 2012). From the 1930s to the early 1960s, there is evidence of attempts to modernize history teaching by implementing more critical thinking and discipline-specific methodologies into teachers' practices, but there was no widespread adoption of these first attempts to modernize history teaching (Nadai, 1993).

The 1960s marked the beginning of a crisis period for history teaching throughout Brazil (Mathias, 2011; Nadai, 1993; Schmidt, 2012). Any progressive ideas for teaching students to think critically and historically were abruptly halted halfway through the decade by the coup that brought the military to power in 1964. The following period of the military dictatorship (1964-1985) was marked by heavy censorship of history teaching (Mathias, 2011; Nadai, 1993; Schmidt, 2012). History was relegated to its previous status as a vehicle for the affirmation of the state – in this case, a military regime known for numerous human rights violations (Mathias, 2011). During this period, history lost its status as an autonomous discipline, and it was supplanted in primary education by social studies classes that delivered a curriculum rooted in patriotic narratives that aimed to sustain the military regime (Schmidt, 2012; Mathias, 2011).

At the end of the military dictatorship, history was then re-established as an autonomous discipline. Across the country, an explosion of debates erupted over the new paths the discipline could take during the period of re-democratization (Mathias, 2011; Nadai, 1993; Schmidt, 2012). While policymakers seemed to favour a more generic interdisciplinary approach to teaching the humanities, history educators and researchers advocated for the benefits of teaching history through discipline-specific methods (Schmidt, 2012). This meant both focusing on the critical use of historical sources and promoting historical thinking and consciousness.

The outcome of this debate between policymakers and history educators and researchers suggests that history education specialists have had limited influence on policymaking in Brazil.

Nevertheless, their influence is noticeable in certain teaching programs and history education research groups (A. L. Costa & Dias de Oliveira, 2007). In these instances, the focus seems to be on thinking about ways to enhance students' abilities to conduct their own historical analysis of evidence, and to help students to exercise their historical thinking. Leading research groups in Brazil are heavily influenced by discussions of historical consciousness as proposed by Jörn Rüsen, an historian internationally recognized for his contributions to the field of historical thinking, and to the theory of historical learning (A. L. Costa & Dias de Oliveira, 2007).

#### *1.1.2.1 Key changes in history teaching in Brazil*

This sub-section aims to demonstrate how the changes in Brazil's sociopolitical context and in history's status as a school discipline have impacted the way history has been taught. To illustrate these impacts, I discuss significant modifications applied to the conceptualization of Brazil's independence in history education. Due to the introductory character of this sub-section, I can only present this topic in its outlines. Nevertheless, even a more cursory examination of the impacts of these changes is helpful in terms of situating the reader with respect to the overall trends that have characterized Brazil's history education.

When history became a school subject, Brazil had only recently gained its independence, and it continued to be governed by a monarchy directly linked to the Portuguese royal family. The emerging history curriculum was heavily influenced by French liberal thought in its conceptualization of history teaching as the teaching of the "history of civilization" (Mathias, 2011; Nadai, 1993). Through this framework, Brazil was conceptualized as a nation that had inherited, and whose job it was to continue to perpetuate the legacy of European civilization (Nadai, 1993). According to Nadai (1993), there was no place in the history curriculum for the contributions of Indigenous peoples and peoples of African descent. Nor did the history curriculum

identify the myriad instances of oppression exercised by the European colonizers with respect to the other 'native' populations under their dominion. In essence, then, the curriculum legitimated the Portuguese colonization as the founding moment for Brazil, silencing, in its wake, the many social conflicts and alternate perspectives in relation to the history and conception of Brazil.

The evolving context of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up until the 1960s brought changes to the conceptualization of Brazil's independence. In an analysis of key textbooks published between 1946 and 1961, Ribeiro Júnior (2008) noted an increasing emphasis on the "heroic" role individuals born on Brazilian soil played, as opposed to the sole focus previously placed on the acts of the Portuguese, in forging the country's independence. The construction of a "Brazilianness" that is independent, or even in opposition to an identity primarily tied to Portugal's heritage, began to emerge. Teaching approaches, however, continued to be marked by traditional factual retelling, now influenced by a reformulation of the protagonists of the independence narrative to include actors born in Brazil.

The construction of the nationalist narrative reached its peak during the military dictatorship. From the mid-1960s, there is a significant change in history teaching in the country. The period of military dictatorship (1964-1985) was marked by heavy censorship, as well as substantial changes to the very structure of history teaching. The biggest change was the relegation of history from being an autonomous subject in elementary schools to being enveloped under the rubric of "social studies" (Bittencourt, 2018; Nadai, 1993; Schmidt, 2012). Researchers have asserted that this change represented a reversal in the effort to consolidate history as a discrete school discipline guided by its particular epistemological approaches and debates, because in the new conceptualization of social studies, historical content and discipline-specific methodologies

became diluted (Schmidt, 2012), and the curriculum was centered around a narrative that aimed to sustain the military regime, and to maintain the existing social order (Mathias, 2011).

The attempts to forge both a nationalist narrative and a patriotic commitment to the regime also influenced the ever-changing conceptualizations of Brazil's independence in history teaching. Barros (2014) demonstrates that there was a considerable and increased emphasis on the mythification of "national heroes" as a way to "sensitize young Brazilian students about their role in building Brazil as a powerful country" (p. 10). In this narrative, the role of the army in winning the country's independence was highlighted through the teaching of various officials' biographies, which served as examples of patriotism.

The change of political regime after the end of the military dictatorship in the 1980s brought about the reorganization of the history curriculum both nationally, and in each state of Brazil, and the creation of new national policies for history teaching. Nevertheless, research on the teaching of Brazilian independence after re-democratization demonstrates that the collective memory of the "national heroes" is still solid among students (J. K. Pereira, 2014). At the same time, these new policies encouraged teachers to work from students' previous knowledge to help them critically evaluate generic and nationalist interpretations of independence. In a study on this topic, Pereira (2014) reports on efforts to reformulate the narrative about these events, beyond the acts of a few selected "heroes", to include an interpretation more focused on the processes involved in gaining independence, including their cultural, political, and economic impacts on society. A key difference between history teaching during and after the dictatorship is that the main focus seems to have shifted from a "re-telling" of so-called facts to helping students to understand history by reflecting both on their own relationship to it, and by learning about history's interpretative nature.

This brief overview of how teaching about Brazil's independence has changed exemplifies the influence on teaching practices of the particular sociopolitical context in which they operate, as well as intellectual debates about the curriculum taking place. To summarize: First, history as a school subject attempted to sustain the idea of a Brazilian national identity directly linked to a European heritage. With few exceptions, an emphasis on the inculcation of a nationalist ethos gained traction through the following decades, reaching its peak during the military dictatorship. During this period, historical teaching methods relied mostly on the memorization of selected facts. The period of re-democratization until the present has been marked by the amplification of different perspectives on history teaching, as well as by the increase in focus on the diversity of historical actors. Additionally, the increased influence of concepts such as historical consciousness and historical thinking is evident in teachers' practices. And though the narratives forged during the dictatorship continue to influence students' conceptualizations of the past, there seems at the same time to be an increasing emphasis in history teaching on the promotion of critical thinking and the teaching of discipline-specific skills. It must be noted, however, that these practices are not always well integrated by teachers.

As noted above, history's status as a school discipline has a troubling record. The practice of teaching history is permeated with challenges that often arise from the sociopolitical context in which history teaching occurs. One of those challenges is the rise of the *Escola Sem Partido* movement. The following sub-section provides an overview of the *Escola Sem Partido* movement, and it introduces the particular challenges it poses for history teachers.

### *1.1.3 Definitions and context: the Escola Sem Partido Movement*

Having first emerged as a movement in 2004, *Escola Sem Partido* only gained national relevance after 2013. Rabelo Colombo (2018) argues that *Escola Sem Partido*'s ultra-conservative

and reactionary ideas about education came into conflict with the social agenda of the Workers Party, led by Lula, who had recently been elected Brazil's president. Following Lula's election, and over the next few years, a series of reforms aimed at the democratization of access to education and the inclusion of marginalized histories in the elementary and secondary curricula were put in place, all of which created a most unfavourable context for *Escola Sem Partido's* educational agenda. However, the Brazilian political climate has shifted over the past few years yet again, this time in a reactionary fashion, in the sense that the far-right's response to internal and external crises (Colombo, 2018), largely built upon anti-Workers Party sentiment (Fernandes, 2017), has won most of the internal political and ideological debates in Brazil.

It is in this new context that *Escola Sem Partido's* ideas have gained relevance, as their propositions reflect and amplify most of the ultra-conservative sides of controversial debates in Brazilian society (Almeida & Caldas, 2017; Bertini et al., 2018; Colombo, 2018). Notably, the valorization of post-political rhetoric (Fernandes, 2017, p. 214), that entails the so-called negation of ideologies in favour of a technocratic logic of carrying out politics, amplified the movement's call for the absolute neutrality of schools regarding (controversial) social issues. However, for the movement, this absolute "neutrality" is translated or understood as the complete absence of such social issues in the schools' curricula (Passos & Guigues Almeida, 2020).

Additionally, the movement's emphasis on using the rhetoric of "us" versus "them" serves to otherize and vilify education workers, and to mobilize many unarticulated fears of parents, (e.g. fear of left-wing movements, social justice education and the ratification of LGBT's rights), in its coordinated call for the control and surveillance of teachers' practices (Colombo, 2018). As a result of these changes from 2013 until the present, *Escola Sem Partido* has united people around

advocacy for the idea of the “neutrality” of teaching in the name of the “fight against left-wing indoctrination and ideological contamination in schools” (Colombo, 2018, p. 61).

Even though there are no statistics regarding the actual number of *Escola Sem Partido* supporters in Brazil, their presence in online settings is immense. Besides *Escola Sem Partido*'s official website, several active accounts on Facebook are linked to the movement. Since 2015, the movement's ideas have also largely set the agenda in various city councils and in congress (Rossi & Pátaro, 2020). Evidence of their influence can be seen in the proposal, and eventual approval, to restrict certain curricula policies in some Brazilian cities in four of the country's five regions (MPPR, 2020). Although *Escola Sem Partido*'s leader has recently announced his withdrawal from the movement, many researchers and educators agree that *Escola Sem Partido*'s ideas have had a major impact in fostering an ongoing atmosphere of fear of persecution for many teachers (Almeida & Caldas, 2017; Britto, 2019; Rossi & Pátaro, 2020; Sousa Junior, 2017).

#### *1.1.3.1 The ways in which the context of the emergence of Escola Sem Partido poses challenges to history teachers*

In Brazil, history teachers currently face multiple challenges related to the rise in popularity of *Escola Sem Partido*. Costa (2020) asserts that hostile discourses about schools and history teachers — such as the ones espoused by *Escola Sem Partido* — frame the representation of history teachers in the collective imagination of society. Costa further argues that these discourses have led to the consolidation of particularly defamatory stereotypes of history teachers, such as the label of the history teacher as indoctrinator. Similarly, Santos dos Passos & Guigues Almeida (2020) highlight that in the context of the anti-intellectualism accompanying the rise of the hegemony of conservatism in Brazil, history teachers' work is negatively impacted – not least through their perception that certain topics in the history curriculum are either off limits or must be censored in



the classroom. Among the topics the authors cite are slavery, revolutionary left-wing movements, dictatorships, and human rights. The authors also identify *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse as a major contributor to this state of affairs, and they point out in their study that history teachers have been feeling uncomfortable, unsure and insecure about teaching topics currently deemed “polemic,” such as politics or gender.

In response to this perceived climate of censorship and distrust directed towards teachers, a climate exacerbated by the current sociopolitical context, the Brazilian Association of History Teaching has created a document that sets out ethical commitments for history teaching (Associação Brasileira de Ensino de História, 2022). This document, a product of the work of members of the association, and including inputs from Brazilian history teachers, prescribes a list of ten ethical commitments to guide the professional practice of history teachers. The authors present it as a reference document to inform and facilitate teachers’ pedagogical decisions, particularly in the current climate of intimidation, and even persecution of teachers (p. 21). The ethical commitments listed are as follows: a commitment to democracy; to the right to education; to human rights and nature; to teachers’ autonomy in the classroom; to scientific reasoning; to history’s methodology; to understanding and addressing relationships of oppression; to memory; to the discussion of controversial or ‘difficult’ history; and, finally, to history itself. A central and common emphasis among these ten commitments is placed on teachers’ duty to act respectfully towards students – based on the principles of equity and inclusion. The document affirms the key role teachers’ play in their students’ learning experience, and it emphasizes their primary responsibility in providing for and facilitating students’ access to peer-reviewed historical knowledge. Furthermore, the document also states that negationist and conspiratorial historical

interpretations, or any interpretation that lacks evidence or methodological legitimacy, should not be given the same credit or credence as knowledge consolidated by a consensus of historians.

The ethical commitments listed in the document produced by the Brazilian Association of History Teaching are intended as a response to the mischaracterization of the roles and duties of teachers popularized by discourses such as *Escola Sem Partido*'s. Overall, the document is aligned with the general teaching principles that guide educational policies and the national curriculum for schools in Brazil. These principles include ethical commitments to equity, justice, solidarity, liberty and autonomy; political commitments to and the acknowledgement of the rights and duties of citizens in their search for equity; and aesthetic/intellectual commitments to the cultivation of sensitivity, rationality, and creativity, as described in Brazil's National Curriculum Guidelines for Basic Education (Brasil, 2013).

As seen in this section, the current sociopolitical context in Brazil presents multiple concomitant challenges to history teachers' professional practice. The widespread dissemination of the discourses related to *Escola Sem Partido* is acknowledged both in the literature and by professional associations as a major constraint to the autonomy of teachers' practices. However, the wider impact of these discourses on the practice of history teachers remains largely underexplored in the literature. In this study, I focus on examining how this unofficial but widely disseminated discourse might frame society's perception of history teachers, and how, in turn, this might affect history teachers' practice, particularly when teaching about topics deemed "polemic" or controversial in the current sociopolitical context.

## **1.2 Research Objectives and Context**

As shown above, history teachers in particular are impacted by *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse (Carvalho Silva, 2020; Moura, 2016). Gender issues, left-wing social movements, and

the history of Brazil's military dictatorship are seen as highly sensitive and controversial topics by *Escola Sem Partido* supporters (Colombo, 2018). International empirical studies have demonstrated that when teaching content that is considered controversial, many teachers report the fear of being seen as indoctrinators, and of becoming targets of community backlash (Washington & Humphries, 2011; Hess, 2004). To avoid these consequences, teachers often engage in self-censorship, or they simply deliver a de-politicized curriculum (Dipardo & Fehn, 2000; Ho, 2010).

Given this context, in carrying out this research I wanted to know how two history teachers in Brazil mobilize their understandings of history and education to conceptualize the impact of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse on how they teach controversial historical issues, and I wanted to know how they resist this discourse. Additionally, I wanted to undertake an in-depth examination of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse, focussing on the movement's formulations about history education. This research, then, has the following objectives: a) providing a detailed analysis of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse regarding history teachers and history education; b) understanding the participant teachers' conceptualization of the movement's discourse and its impact on how they teach controversial topics; c) comprehending these teachers' epistemological understanding of history and education; and d) understanding how these epistemological views guide their positioning in relation to the movement's discourse and their own teaching practice. Achieving such objectives would provide a deeper understanding of history teachers' challenges when teaching controversial issues, including the various ways in which they attempt to resist the pressure to conform to *Escola Sem Partido's* position on either limiting or even eliminating debate on these topics.

The specific research questions that guide this investigation are the following: How do two Brazilian history teachers conceptualize and resist the impact of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse

on how they teach controversial historical issues? How does their understanding of history and education influence their positioning?

These questions and my research objectives led me to design a two-part study. First, I analyzed *Escola Sem Partido*'s texts to produce a detailed account of the movement's discourse. Based on the knowledge gained from this first phase, I studied the experiences of two history teachers in relation to how their practice was influenced by *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse. To make this study manageable for master's level research, I opted to conduct a qualitative, in-depth analysis of the experiences of two high school history teachers from an area where *Escola Sem Partido* has been both prominent and influential. This analysis serves as a case study to examine the influence of this broader social phenomenon. As a case study, however, this research cannot and does not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of this broader phenomenon; rather, it aims to provide a rich, context-specific analysis of the reported experiences of two teachers who are daily immersed in the social context under study. Such an analysis can contribute to developing and articulating key questions that can lead to the generation of theories that can help us conceptualize and understand the broader impact of discourses such as *Escola Sem Partido*'s on teachers' practice.

For the first part of this study, I conducted a discourse analysis of texts that are foundational to *Escola Sem Partido*. These texts were gathered from the movement's website, YouTube, and news articles. All documents expressed the movement's and its supporters' vision about teachers, education, and indoctrination in general, in addition to their specific vision of history and specific attitudes towards history teachers. I analyzed the variation in the content of texts to understand their intended function in their particular context (Potter & Wetherell, 1994). My goal was to examine the cultural and ideological values and assumptions the texts build and are based on

(Billig, 2001). A more detailed explanation of the methodological procedures is presented in chapter 4.

For the second part of the study, two high school history teachers participated in three data collection procedures. First, they were individually interviewed for about one hour. This interview was designed as an in-depth, semi-structured interview. Second, the participants wrote responses to a guided reflection journal. Finally, the participants engaged in a second interview, with a similar design to the first one. To answer this study's first research question<sup>2</sup>, I analyzed this data based on the analytical approach of constant comparison inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2018; Gibbs, 2018). The teachers' data was categorized according to emerging similarities that helped generate responses to the research question. To answer the second research question<sup>3</sup>, I followed an interpretive approach, and employed narrative structural analysis and cross-comparison inquiry to analyze the data (Zanazanian, 2019). The methodology selected to analyze the participants' data is an adaptation of the one designed by Zanazanian (2019) for examining historical consciousness through history-as-interpretive-templates. As will be further explained in chapters 3 and 4, such templates refer to the schemas participants use to engage with history, to make sense of the world, and to act upon it. This method of data analysis aimed to identify the teachers' incognizant understandings of history in order to analyze how they articulate their understanding of history and education to position themselves in relation to *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse.

Through these two parts of this study, this master's thesis hopes to provide insights into how history teachers, who are the primary target of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse, conceptualize the impact of this right-wing discourse on their practice. Additionally, it hopes to provide insights

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<sup>2</sup> How do two Brazilian history teachers conceptualize and resist the impact of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse on how they teach controversial historical issues?

<sup>3</sup> How does the teachers' epistemological understanding of history and education influence their positioning?

into how a teacher's understanding of history impacts their positioning and resistance to societal pressures that aim to limit the discussion of controversial historical topics in the classroom. This analysis provides relevant information for teachers, and teacher educators in Brazil, who can learn from these teachers' experiences to formulate best practices, and to provide more effective support to new teachers working in similar contexts. Finally, this thesis hopes to contribute to the broader discussion in history education around teaching controversial issues in polarized societies.

### **1.3 Explanation of Chapters**

In chapter 2, I review the literature on *Escola Sem Partido*, as well as the literature on the challenges that history and social study teachers face when teaching controversial topics in their classrooms, both in Brazil and internationally. In chapter 3, I discuss the theoretical perspectives that guide my methodological choices for this research. Chapter 4 details the methodology used in this research. Chapter 5 presents the results of the discourse analysis of *Escola Sem Partido*'s texts, unpacking the movement's assumptions about the workings of education and history education, and exploring how such ideas construct "history teachers" as subjects in the texts.

In chapter 6, I analyze and discuss the participants' conceptualization of the impact of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse in the way they teach controversial historical issues, and in how they articulate their resistance to it. In chapter 7, I discuss how the teachers' epistemological understanding of history and education influences their positioning regarding *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse. Finally, chapter 8 concludes the thesis and evaluates its possible implications for policy and future research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

I start this chapter by reviewing the recent literature on *Escola Sem Partido*. Next, I review the broader literature on the challenges that history and social study teachers face when teaching controversial topics in their classrooms, and I analyze the articles that discuss the experiences of teachers in Brazil. The first part of this review provides a better understanding of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse and its impact on history teachers' approaches to teaching. The second part discusses what is considered a controversial issue in history teaching, what the common challenges are for teaching such issues, and, according to the literature, how teachers usually approach these issues. Overall, this review demonstrates that history teachers around the world face multiple pedagogical and sociopolitical challenges when faced with teaching controversial issues. In polarized societies, and in societies with fragile democratic traditions, these challenges tend to be amplified. In Brazil — a fragile democracy *and* a polarized society — *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse operates as a force that effectively prevents many if not most teachers from meaningfully engaging with controversial issues. As such, it has succeeded in creating a climate of surveillance and censorship that has resulted in teachers mainly deciding to avoid such issues for fear of social backlash and job instability.

For the part of the chapter that concerns *Escola Sem Partido*, I reviewed studies published in Portuguese between 2016 and 2022. My guiding questions for the review were: a) what does the literature say about *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse? And b) what does the literature say about *Escola Sem Partido*'s impact on history teachers' practice? I systematically reviewed relevant theoretical articles, literature reviews, and qualitative empirical studies. I consulted the Education Research Information Center (ERIC), and Google Scholar and Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO - Brasil) to locate and obtain the relevant studies. I searched for relevant articles using

the term “Escola Sem Partido” in combination with the keywords “discourse,” “ideology,” “history education,” and “history teachers.”

I proceeded similarly for the part that concerns the challenges faced by history and social study teachers. I reviewed studies published in English or Portuguese between 2000 and 2022. I focused on literature that discussed the challenges of teaching controversial history topics worldwide, and in Brazil. I also included articles that discussed such issues regarding social studies teachers. My guiding questions for the review were the following: a) How does the literature classify controversial issues in history teaching? b) What are the common challenges that history teachers face when teaching controversial issues in Brazil and worldwide? And c) Which teachers’ attitudes towards teaching controversial issues does the literature identify? I conducted a systematic review of relevant qualitative and mixed methods empirical studies. I consulted the Education Research Information Center (ERIC), Google Scholar and Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO - Brasil) to access those studies. I searched for relevant articles using the term “controversial issues” in combination with the keywords “teacher positionality,” “history teaching,” “history education,” and “historical thinking.” I used the following analytical strategies for both parts of the literature review: first, I read and summarized all the texts; next, I synthesized key themes and ideas from the literature and grouped similar emerging themes following the logic of cross-comparison through open-ended inductive coding (Butler-Kisber, 2018). Through this procedure, I was able to distinguish trends in the literature that ground the analysis I present in the following pages.

## **2.1 Escola Sem Partido**

Given *Escola Sem Partido*’s relatively short period of national visibility, there are no current studies that have engaged in a longitudinal and systematic review of its effects on Brazilian



education. However, since 2016 many studies have focussed on certain aspects of the movement. In a literature review that has comprehensively catalogued and examined academic publications about *Escola Sem Partido* from 2016 to 2018, Rossi and Pátaro (2020) identified four main topics of analysis: 1) *Escola Sem Partido*'s impact on curricula; 2) the movement's conceptualization of neutrality and ideology within the classroom; 3) the movement's conceptualization of "gender ideology;" and 4) the movement's impact on the relationship between students and teachers.

Most of the research conducted on the first three topics analyzes the (un)constitutionality of *Escola Sem Partido*'s precepts (Almeida & Caldas, 2017; Miguel, 2016). Researchers point out that *Escola Sem Partido*'s propositions are not compatible with Brazil's Federal Constitution and the Guidelines and Bases of National Education Law, which clearly state that schools are to be administered following the principles of democratic management, secularism and valuing diversity (Silva et al., 2020, p. 3). However, the unconstitutionality of *Escola Sem Partido*'s agenda has neither stopped the movement's articulation nor the spread of its discourse, despite the fact that many of its propositions are grounded in religious principles, and that the curriculum changes it has advocated for minimize the value of issues of diversity. As will be demonstrated in the literature review, *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse has impacted student-teacher relationships, teachers' practices, and discussions of educational policies to a great extent, even if it has not succeeded in establishing itself as the official educational policy.

Another common point among scholars is their emphasis on the critique of *Escola Sem Partido*'s conceptions of education as neutral and essentially technical, and of students as a passive and captive audience for potentially manipulative teachers (Almeida & Caldas, 2017; Bertini et al., 2018; Britto, 2019; de Freitas, 2017; Rossi & Pátaro, 2020). According to the movements' propositions, the teacher's role in the classroom should be restricted to information transferring,

which would then preclude them from the possibility of indoctrinating their students with their own political or moral biases (Britto, 2019). In addition, corresponding to Apple and Oliver's (1996) reading of some conservative groups' ideas about the proper role of school and public education in the United States, it can be argued that for *Escola Sem Partido*, "public schooling *itself* is a site of immense danger" (p. 424) for students and parents' authority.

As stated in the introduction, *Escola Sem Partido* incites students and parents to adopt a posture of surveillance and intimidation towards teachers, and it encourages the recording and public denouncing of supposedly "doctrinaire practices" (Britto, 2019). Since any comment about social justice, gender, or current events can be considered a doctrinaire practice (Bertini et al., 2018), some studies have argued that *Escola Sem Partido* presents a significant threat to democratic education, and to humanities disciplines in particular (Moura, 2016). Rossi and Pátaro (2020) argue that studies have shown the conservative, religious fundamentalist, and heteronormative basis of the formulation of *Escola Sem Partido*'s precepts, which reveals the movement's ideological character despite *Escola Sem Partido* supporters' claims of neutrality. Similarly, Seffner (2017) argues that the influence of *Escola Sem Partido* and other conservative discourses has led to attempts to control the history curriculum by lobbying for the exclusion of topics that deal with diversity. The author claims that such an exclusionary context impacts teachers by restricting their pedagogical freedom.

The teachers in Caetano's study (2021) list the climate of censorship as the most felt impact of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse and influence in their daily practice. The researcher interviewed history, philosophy, and sociology high-school teachers in Rio de Janeiro. Most teachers acknowledged having engaged in self-surveillance or even self-censorship when teaching controversial issues. Even though most teachers have not endured severe consequences related to

the movement's discourse, they affirm that *Escola Sem Partido* successfully introduced a climate of censorship that was viewed as potentially limiting to their full engagement with controversial issues.

Similarly, Alves Maia Junior (2022) demonstrated that the climate of surveillance encouraged by *Escola Sem Partido* had impacted the work of many history teachers who participated in the research study. These teachers mention the limiting effects of the constant fear of being under the surveillance of parents and students, and of being wrongly labelled as indoctrinators for their critical or progressive pedagogy. This fear might come from *Escola Sem Partido*'s common practice of encouraging supporters to record classes and share any "suspicious" instructional material online to denounce teachers' supposed doctrinaire practices (see Britto, 2019). Additionally, the participants share the heavy emotional toll of being targeted by defamatory discourses and being labelled as indoctrinators. For them, this situation generates nervousness and anxiety (p. 178).

Alves Maia Junior's study also showed that teachers feel more vulnerable to these negative consequences when teaching about controversial issues, particularly the period of Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985). This period is considered controversial by many teachers and researchers as different groups in Brazilian society have different interpretations both of the events, and of the violation of human rights that occurred, ranging from complete denial to attempts at justification to critical opposition and condemnation (Alves Maia Junior, 2022, p. 181). Alves Maia Junior emphasizes that the research participants reported a concrete fear of a climate of censorship, as they do not feel comfortable discussing themes that are controversial in the classroom, not least because they fear it might spark community reprisal if they assume more critical pedagogical approaches.

### 2.1.1 *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse

The construction of the binary between neutrality and ideology in education is the most analyzed feature of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse in the literature. Many scholars scrutinize the instances in which the movement communicated its defence of a neutral education against teachers' supposed "ideological contamination" of knowledge with leftist ideas (Carvalho Silva, 2020; Gemelli, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2019). These scholars are equally interested in analyzing how, in a highly political debate, the movement both mobilizes commonly held beliefs about scientism and utilizes language which draws on the generalized fear of left-wing politics in Brazil to construct its position as neutral.

Concerning this use of language, Daltoé and Ferreira (2019) argue that *Escola Sem Partido* disseminates its ideas about what schools and education should look like through the use of imprecise statements embedded in majoritarian narratives that construct the school as an apolitical space. Similarly, Carvalho Silva (2020) argues that the circulation of *Escola Sem Partido's* agenda through multiple distinct media works to normalize the movement's highly ideological and controversial ideas of education as neutral and non-partisan.

In the movement's construction of itself and its objectives as neutral, everyone and everything that is not in agreement with its assumptions and conclusions is automatically construed as ideological (Gemelli, 2020; Silva et al., 2020). However, many scholars point out that despite the extensive use of words like "ideology" and "ideological," it is not possible to find a clear definition of what is meant by the use of these words in the movement's texts, which may signify that the meaning of ideology is meant to be left implicit and vague – all the easier to be aimed at anyone in opposition to their supposedly ideologically-free position of neutrality. (Carvalho Silva, 2020; Daltoé & Ferreira, 2019; Gemelli, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2019).

In this respect, Gemelli argues that in most texts she analyzed, the adjective “ideological” is attributed to anything in schools that cannot be rationalized by a cost/benefit analysis, and that is not strictly in line with an exclusively economic or transactional conception of the purpose of education (Gemelli, 2020, p. 301). The author’s analysis thus associates *Escola Sem Partido*’s latent positivistic perspective, combined with a rejection of any kind of critical discussion of socially charged issues in the classroom, with the increasing trend in Brazil of conceptualizing schools through a “neoliberal-conservative” framework (p. 292). Here we find the conjunction of a neoliberal view informing the organization of education with the moral constraints on controversial topics imposed by a conservative stance.

Carvalho Silva (2020), in his analysis of *Escola Sem Partido* discourse, argues that ideology is thought of as a negative word related only to teachers and what is considered the “other” from the movement’s perspective. He also calls attention to the terms to which “ideology” is often linked in *Escola Sem Partido*’s discourse, namely, gender and communism. Similarly, Daltoé and Ferreira (2019) assert that the implicit meaning of *Escola Sem Partido*’s vague formulations about ideology should be understood as viewing the term as dispensable, and unrelated to real knowledge.

Another common theme in *Escola Sem Partido*’s discourse about ideology is the movement’s discrediting of classic left-wing authors from the humanities and social sciences, (especially Marx, Gramsci and Paulo Freire), and, in general, viewing these disciplines as privileged sites for ideological indoctrination in schools (Gemelli, 2020, p. 304; Oliveira et al., 2019, p. 473). In his analysis of various texts from the movement, Carvalho Silva (2020) argues that STEM subjects are not the target of *Escola Sem Partido*’s surveillance, while teachers of subjects in the humanities are treated as a significant “threat,” due to *Escola Sem Partido*’s

positivist conception of knowledge. In this framework, for *Escola Sem Partido*, explanations about society that are qualitative and historically situated are deemed ideological, and therefore suspect, a characteristic, and a charge, never attributed to the “neutral,” and therefore legitimate or worthy, science-knowledge “transferred” to students in STEM classes.

From this perspective, Carvalho Silva discusses the difference between evaluations of the ideological character of schools coming from authors of a critical tradition, understood as progressive critiques, and *Escola Sem Partido*’s evaluation of the issue, understood as a reactionary critique. Such a discussion is also raised by Daltoé and Ferreira (2019). Carvalho Silva argues that authors such as Marx and Althusser explicitly affirm that all knowledge is produced within the spectrum of an ideology (2020, p. 184). Such an understanding is lacking in *Escola Sem Partido*’s position. Daltoé and Ferreira (2020) further distinguish these distinct propositions about ideology by saying that while authors from a critical tradition recognize that the idea of being neutral is an effect of the ideology itself, *Escola Sem Partido* supporters think of ideology as something that can be stripped of an otherwise neutral education. The foundation of *Escola Sem Partido*’s critique of ideology in schools can, thus, be understood as reactionary and not progressive.

Evidence of the above proposition is found in the literature that analyses the minutiae of *Escola Sem Partido*’s discursive creation of the categories of student and teacher. According to the movements’ propositions, the teachers’ role in the classroom would be restricted to information transferring, which would supposedly be stripped of any political or moral biases (Britto, 2019). Teachers that do not comply with this view of education are regarded as manipulators of their students, who are seen through the passive lens of being a captive audience (Almeida & Caldas, 2017; Bertini et al., 2018; Britto, 2019; de Freitas, 2017; Rossi & Pátaro, 2020). There is no

meaningful, not to mention critical interchange between student and teacher in this conception. In this sense, Colombo (2018) argues that the movement's emphasis on binary constructions of "us" versus "them" works to vilify educational workers, and it blames teachers for the degeneration of the imagined previously shared moral and religious values of Brazilian society. According to Colombo, *Escola Sem Partido* constructs its narrative by mobilizing many unarticulated fears of parents, (i.e., fears of leftist movements and the ratification of LGBT rights), into a coordinated call for control and surveillance of teachers' practices (Colombo, 2018, p. 58). From this perspective, Carvalho Silva (2020) argues that *Escola Sem Partido* constructs and reinforces a dichotomy between the teacher/instructor and the students' family to frame itself as the entity that will help students be free of teachers' at best misplaced and at worst nefarious influence (p. 186).

All the papers reviewed in this section touch directly or indirectly on *Escola Sem Partido*'s impact on the teacher-student relationship. A significant sense of distrust in teachers and hostility in the classroom is the most commented upon impact. However, most papers do not provide empirical research about how teachers make sense of this movement's impact on their practice<sup>4</sup>. For instance, many articles argue that *Escola Sem Partido* represents a potential threat to democratic education. Nonetheless, based on Barton and Avery's (2016) argument that "constraints on teaching arise not only from the explicit policy but also from real or perceived pressures from the wider community" (p. 1018), I argue that *Escola Sem Partido* does not need to be an official curriculum policy to be viewed as a constraint on teachers' practices.

## **2.2 Challenges related to the teaching of controversial issues**

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<sup>4</sup> The notable exceptions are Caetano's (2021) and Alves Maia Junior's (2022) studies.

The literature on history and social studies teaching provides rich evidence that teachers consider the fear of community backlash as one of the biggest constraints to meaningful engagement with contradictory issues in their classrooms; other constraints include the pressure of covering content for high-stakes standardized tests, and a lack of self-confidence (Camicia, 2008; Dipardo & Fehn, 2000; Hess, 2004; Ho, 2010; King, 2009; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Miller-Lane et al., 2006; Misco & Patterson, 2007; Washington & Humphries, 2011). Despite the lack of a definitive consensus on what constitutes a controversial issue in a history or social studies curriculum — an issue that will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter — many studies report that, overall, teachers tend to consider the discussion of contentious topics an integral part of these disciplines (Hess, 2004; Kello, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Misco & Patterson, 2007; Wassermann, 2011; Woolley, 2017; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). Nevertheless, many teachers understand that their engagement with such issues comes with risks: job instability (Misco & Patterson, 2007), community backlash (Dipardo & Fehn, 2000; Miller-Lane et al., 2006; Washington & Humphries, 2011), and isolation (King, 2009, p. 221).

In a study that analyzes the thinking of twelve secondary-school social studies teachers in the United States regarding their intent to engage in discussions of controversial topics, Miller-Lane et al. (2006) report that for teachers, “sometimes, self-preservation might have to trump a well-reasoned argument to engage in controversial issues” (p. 34). According to the authors, the teachers were concerned about the response of parents to their children’s engagement with debates “where the opposition’s point of view was given a fair and respectful hearing” (p. 34), even though they were certain that their students were well equipped to engage in such discussions meaningfully.



Similarly, in a study of American student-teachers views about academic freedom, Misco and Patterson (2007) reported that a group of its participants see a clear link between engagement with controversial issues and job insecurity, in the sense that controversy could undermine their career prospects (p. 537). The authors contend that a lack of administrative support and communitarian encouragement for the teaching of controversial topics could result in teachers' disengagement from such topics, which would most likely happen in the form of self-censorship. This argument resonates with Dipardo and Fehn's (2000) affirmation that conscious intent and support from the community and institutions are needed for teachers to "challenge and take risks" (p. 186). Regrettably, teachers are often faced with an environment that discourages these practices.

The literature also indicates that teachers can feel communitarian constraints to their full engagement with controversial issues directly — in the case of overt opposition to a curriculum or approach, — or indirectly — such as through the constitution of a climate of censorship, as described by Ho (2010) in her analysis of this phenomenon in the educational context of Singapore. According to Ho, the citizenship classes she observed failed to critically analyze Singapore's national narrative due to "the combination of a climate of censorship and a regime of high stakes tests that stifle democratic discourse within the classroom" (p. 217). As understood by Ho, the climate of censorship — a concept she borrows from Cornbleth (2001) — refers to external challenges that can threaten one's approach to the subject matter and choice of pedagogy (p. 235). In this sense, Ho affirms that when challenges to Singapore's narrative emerge, they "tend to be muted, personalized, and localized" (p. 235), all of which serve to suppress any kind of substantive dissent to or critical analysis of the state's official narrative. Thus, it seems clear that a direct

consequence of teaching within a climate of censorship is that teachers often engage with self-censorship to adapt to their environment.

If concerns about community reactions do not lead teachers to disengage entirely with teaching controversial topics, they can still lead to a non-critical and depoliticized handling and delivery of such topics (Dipardo & Fehn, 2000). A study of a multicultural class in a school in an American, mostly white and affluent community that was set up in response to some incidents of overt racial bigotry, (Dipardo & Fehn, 2000), concludes that tacit pressures in the school and community were major factors that impacted the teachers' designing of the curriculum. In this case, the school and teachers' intention to create a so-called multicultural class, while at the same time attempting to avoid the spotlight so as not to fan the flames of any potentially combustible issue resulted in a diluted, depoliticized curriculum that failed to fulfill any critical aim of genuine multicultural education.

### *2.2.1 The particular challenges teachers face in polarized or post-conflict societies*

McAvoy and Hess (2013) analyze how teachers' engagement with controversial topics is impacted when operating in a climate of polarization. The authors contend that in extremely polarized contexts — such as in parts of the USA — it is far less likely that people will engage in “high-quality political discourse” (p. 26). Furthermore, according to the authors, teaching in a polarized environment also tends to make it far less likely that teachers will include controversial political topics in their curriculum. Fearing their community's reprisal, teachers might choose to restrict their students' engagement with some topics or opt for non-participatory pedagogies. The two author's argument is relevant not only within the geographical boundaries of the USA, but also in other places where polarization permeates everyday political discourse, as is the case in Brazil (Fernandes, 2017).

There is also an extensive literature on teaching controversial historical issues in divided societies, or societies recently emerging from conflict (Iglesias et al., 2017; McCully, 2006, 2012; Wassermann, 2011; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). Researchers point to how emotionally charged teaching about a certain event of the past can be in such societies, given that history is “closely tied to the emotions associated with national identity and collective belonging” (McCully, 2012, p. 148). McCully (2012) argues that an inquiry-based, multi-perspective teaching methodology that is directly relevant to students’ cultural and political experiences is best suited to responsibly engage teachers and students in teaching controversial historical issues in such societies. However, teachers do not often receive sufficient support to engage with this pedagogy. In such cases, teachers might be expected to teach controversial historical topics in a constructive manner but receive little support to deal with their own positionality and memories of such past events, such as in the case of post-Apartheid history teaching in KwaZulu-Natal schools, as described by Wassermann (2011). According to the author, the teachers in these schools received little support from the administration, and almost no opportunities for professional development that could equip them with the skills necessary to cope with the challenges of teaching a subject so linked with their personal experiences.

Iglesias et al. (2017) highlight the influences of macro politics and societal constraints on teachers’ engagement when teaching controversial issues. In a study of student history teachers’ understandings and practices for teaching controversial themes in Chile, the authors identified that most participants presented an “avoidance” approach when teaching such topics, even though they acknowledged their importance. The authors argue that many student teachers feared getting “caught in the ideological battles confronting political parties in the wider society” (p. 456). The authors argue that such feelings might be related to the strategies of social control based on fear

used during Chile's dictatorship (1973-1990), and from which Chilean society has not yet recovered (p. 456).

Additionally, Zambylas and Kambani (2012) argue that the emotional discomfort associated with touching on controversial issues is one of the most important challenges to the implementation of an inquiry-based, multi-perspective teaching approach, particularly in ethnically divided societies (p. 111). According to the authors, other challenges to teachers' full engagement with controversial issues include the emotional resistance of students, a lack of professional development, community influence and the fear of community backlash, and the structure of the nation-state. The authors' study of 18 Greek-Cypriot elementary school history teachers demonstrates the importance of paying more attention to the role emotion plays in the teaching of such issues, in contrast to one that only emphasizes a technocratic approach to pedagogy. The authors argue that these emotional challenges indicate that teaching controversial issues is always politicized "in the context of a divided society embedded in dominant nation-state structures" (p. 125).

In this section, I reviewed the literature around the challenges that teachers face when teaching controversial issues in polarized or post-conflict societies. This review is relevant for this thesis because Brazil itself is a post-conflict country, with a politically polarized society. Therefore, an analysis of analogous cases elsewhere can provide insights into understanding the issues Brazilian teachers might be facing, and it can help to conceptualize what might be the best practices for teaching controversial historical issues both in Brazil and in other such contexts.

### *2.2.2 Teachers' positionality*

On the topic of teachers' attitudes regarding teaching controversial political issues, Hess (2004) has distinguished four different approaches that illustrate the complexity involved in

teachers' pedagogical decision-making processes. According to Hess, teachers might opt to approach the matter by adopting one of the following strategies: (1) *Denial*, which means teaching the issue as if it were not controversial; (2) *Privilege*, in which teachers teach “toward a particular perspective” (p. 260); (3) *Avoidance*, which is arguably similar to the practice of self-censorship, as teachers opt to avoid the controversial issue altogether; and (4) *Balance*, in which teachers teach the issue as genuinely controversial. Additionally, Kitson and McCully (2005) classify three other approaches history teachers might adopt in tackling controversial issues. In their classification, they describe a spectrum that ranges from complete avoidance (the *avoiders*) to a full embrace of controversy (the *risk-takers*). Situated in the middle of the two positions are the *containers*, who engage in controversial issues but attempt to avoid the potentially difficult feelings associated with them by adopting strategies such as choosing “parallel topics that are similar to, but also distant from, home” (p. 35).

On the same topic of teachers' approach to controversial issues, Pollak et al. (2018) argue that teachers might encounter more challenges in teaching such issues in younger countries with deeply divided democracies because such countries lack institutional stability and common ground. In a study of Israeli teachers' approach to teaching about Israel's founding fathers, the authors report that the curriculum avoids controversy even though it addresses deeply controversial content. According to the authors, that is the case because the curriculum is designed “to inculcate a shared national ethos” (Pollak et al., 2018, p. 387). In this way, the teachers engage with controversial issues but avoid risk-taking by *sidestepping* the controversial content or disconnecting it from its sociopolitical complexities (p. 396), and by *scholasticizing* the discussion, that is, by focusing on literacy practices instead of the controversial content (p. 399).

### *2.2.3 Classifying an issue as controversial*

The different categorizations of teachers' attitudes towards teaching controversial issues described above cannot be examined de-contextually. As Hess (2004) argues, what a teacher considers a controversial topic might not be seen the same way by parents. Thus, even the most balanced approach to a topic for some, could be understood as political propaganda, or even indoctrination for others. As stated above, there is no consensus among different social groups with respect to whether an issue is considered controversial, or what would imbue it with such a status. According to Camicia (2008), "the categorization of an issue as controversial is influenced by power relations" (p. 300). For the author, curricula and controversies are always embedded in ideological contexts, and it is necessary to understand these contexts to evaluate and decide whether or why an issue is considered controversial. Camicia argues that some people can view an historical interpretation as well-established and thus non-controversial, while others can challenge the same interpretation and consider it controversial. The author offers the ideologies of national exceptionalism and capitalism in the USA as examples of this phenomenon by arguing that most U.S. history books present capitalism as non-controversial, while many scholars might challenge this view and treat it as highly controversial.

At the same time, there is an extensive discussion in the literature with respect to identifying what could be a more definitive criterion for classifying a given topic as controversial. The educational philosopher Michel Hand (2008) argues in favour of the epistemic criterion in making such a determination, as opposed to the behavioural criterion. In brief, the behavioural criterion states that an issue is controversial when "numbers of people are observed to disagree about statements and assertions made in connection with the issue" (Dearden, 1981, as cited in Hand, 2008, p. 217). Here, consensus would provide the justification for an issue to be deemed

controversial. On the other hand, the epistemic criterion states that an issue is controversial when “contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason” (p. 221). According to Hand, the epistemic criterion favours the central educational aim of equipping students with “a capacity for, and inclination to, rational thought and action” (p. 218). That is because the classification of an issue as controversial requires a rational evaluation of contrary views based on the evidence or arguments that support those views, and not on the existence of a considerable number of people supporting a contrary view regardless of the lack of credible evidence. In his defence of the epistemic criterion, Hand also argues against adopting the political criterion, which states that “where public values are silent on a moral question, teachers have no business promoting an answer to it” (p. 222), to determine whether or not to teach morally controversial issues. The author argues against this criterion for several reasons, one of the most significant being that it threatens education’s central goal, which is the promotion of rational thinking.

For Hand, the classification of an issue as controversial leads teachers to opt for teaching it as controversial instead of teaching-it-as-settled. Hand classifies the former as nondirective teaching, and the latter as directive teaching. Other educational researchers and philosophers have disagreed, at least in part, with Hand’s propositions about the teaching approaches that follow from the epistemic criterion. Warnick and Smith (2014) argue that directive teaching of epistemically settled controversies may also be detrimental to students’ reasoning, because it introduces an element of social authority. On the other hand, Tillson (2017) proposes a tempered defence of the epistemic criterion by arguing in favour of directive teaching at least in “momentous propositions,” which he describes as “those propositions for which the stakes are high regarding the consequences of failing to believe correctly” (p. 175).

A relevant criticism of the different criteria used for classifying issues as controversial, including subsequent decisions regarding appropriate teaching approaches, comes from Yacek (2018). The author builds on aspects of the criticism of Hand's conceptualization of the epistemic criterion to argue that educators must consider the psychological condition when teaching controversial issues. According to Yacek, the psychological condition "understands controversy by reference to the existence of intellectual tension between at least two of the positions within a controversial issue, which positions must seem plausible options for belief according to the individuals considering the issue" (p. 81). This means that for Yacek, students will only engage with an issue as controversial if this psychological condition is met. Otherwise, students might continue to conceptualize something as settled that the teacher deems controversial because there is no tension between the different positions for them.

Another point of view regarding the issue of controversy comes from Washington and Humphries (2011). In their study, the authors analyzed a case where a teacher encountered students who considered certain situations regarding race, situations that are commonly considered uncontroversial, as highly controversial issues. In this study, the authors analyzed how this teacher navigated these tense and unavoidable encounters, and they demonstrated the situatedness of controversy: some issues *became* "controversial" within the setting of this particular classroom because students treated them this way. Such issues might not meet the epistemic criterion because it might be argued that these students' positions regarding race relations are contrary to reason. However, they are lively issues the teacher must deal with in her daily practice. In this respect, Hand (2008) has noted that sometimes, due to "contextual constraints" (p. 228), schools cannot teach certain topics in accordance with the epistemic criterion.



The case of the teacher in Washington and Humphries study is comparable to teachers in Brazil dealing with the influence of *Escola Sem Partido* on the history curriculum. Oftentimes, the topics *Escola Sem Partido* claims to be controversial would not be classified as such through the epistemic criterion. However, the movement poses a contextual constraint influential enough to lead some teachers to nevertheless treat such issues as highly controversial.

#### 2.2.4 Teaching controversial issues in Brazilian history classes

The literature on teaching controversial historical issues in Brazil indicates that teachers face interlocking challenges in engaging meaningfully with the themes that can arise in classroom discussions. On the primary level, in the daily context of classroom interactions, teachers must overcome their students' resistance to engaging with controversial or difficult topics that might generate uncomfortable feelings (Divardim de Oliveira, 2020; Gil & Camargo, 2018; Gonçalves, 2018). On the secondary level, teachers must navigate a hostile teaching environment, permeated both by the circulation of *Escola Sem Partido's* notorious and defamatory discourses, as well as by the rise of conservative and far-right interpretations of key contentious events in Brazil's recent past. Researchers have argued that teaching in such a context hinders meaningful engagement with controversial issues, as it generates a climate of censorship. (Alves Maia Junior, 2022; Caetano, 2021; Nunes, 2021).

In the literature, many authors also classify controversial historical issues as "sensitive issues" or "difficult histories" (Gil & Camargo, 2018; Nunes, 2021). According to Nunes (2021), a characteristic that connects all controversial and difficult historical issues is that these histories are engaged in constant narrative dispute. Nunes identifies Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985) as one such issue. He argues that it is difficult and controversial because it can be understood

as a part of an “alive past” that exercises its influence over the present, “for the whole society that still suffers from the legacies of that moment” (p. 31).

Nunes emphasizes that teaching about such a topic invariably generates controversy, as family memory and social views and debates often contrast with historiographical perspectives. It is in this context that Nunes stresses the importance of stimulating students’ critical judgment of historical narratives, and their critical interpretation of primary sources in advancing meaningful learning of “loaded” and controversial issues. Similarly, for Gil and Camargo (2018), uncomfortable feelings or adverse reactions to controversial or sensitive topics should not be avoided in the classroom, but rather taken into consideration when crafting pedagogical strategy. For the authors, teaching such controversial topics is relevant because they both expose history’s interpretive nature, and they challenge generalizing master historical narratives.

Another author that subscribes to the idea of using controversy as a pedagogical entry point for history is Divardim de Oliveira (2020). The author agrees that controversial topics such as Brazil’s military dictatorship raise controversy because there are multiple and often conflicting interpretations about this historical period. The author, however, argues in favour of teachers using this diversity of historical interpretation as a didactic tool to generate meaning about this period and thus facilitate critical, autonomous, and meaningful learning for students. As a result, students practice writing history by analyzing varied, often primary sources.

Gonçalves (2018) also emphasizes the appropriateness of critically studying multiple sources to engage responsibly with controversial historical content. However, the author argues that despite the overall acceptance of this approach among history-education researchers, it is still not popular among history teachers. The author asserts that teachers in Brazil often teach controversial topics by focusing only on factual aspects to avoid controversy. One interesting

implication of Gonçalves' study is that it brings evidence that contradicts *Escola Sem Partido's* assertions about Brazilian education. Ironically, and contrary to the movement's claims, most history teachers do not currently teach in progressive or liberal ways: in fact, they try to avoid controversy in the classroom and to teach history more traditionally so as not to stir up any backlash. The movement's discourse, then, in stirring up outrage over a reality that does not exist, has largely succeeded, at this point, in preventing most teachers from engaging with the more progressive or critical historical teaching approaches that *Escola Sem Partido* seem to so fear.

As mentioned above, the literature acknowledges that history teachers face interlocking challenges in teaching controversial issues. The contextual challenges related to teachers' and students' attitudes towards such issues are pervaded by fundamental sociopolitical factors that influence teachers' decision-making. Many researchers emphasize the climate of censorship and intimidation caused by *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse and the rise of conservative and far-right (biased) interpretations of key contentious events in Brazil's recent past as a factor that undermines teachers' courage to engage with controversy. As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, Caetano's (2021) study reports cases of self-censorship among teachers due to the influence of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse. Similarly, Alves Maia Junior (2022) argues that teachers feel more vulnerable to such discourses when teaching about controversial issues. These findings support this master's thesis in the sense that they acknowledge *Escola Sem Partido's discourse* as a community pressure that impacts teachers' practices regarding controversial issues. This research then dialogues with this literature and advances it by providing a thorough analysis of the experiences from two history teachers in this regard.

### **2.3 Emerging connections**

This literature review demonstrates that history and social studies teachers around the world face multiple pedagogical and sociopolitical challenges that impact their choices for how and when to teach controversial issues. Fear of community backlash and job instability are powerful forces that discourage teachers from meaningfully engaging with such issues (Dipardo & Fehn, 2000; Ho, 2010). McAvoy and Hess (2013), Wassermann (2011), Kello (2016) Iglesias et al. (2017) and Pollak et al. (2018) show that such challenges tend to be amplified in polarized societies or societies with a fragile democratic tradition. Brazil itself is a fragile democracy and a politically polarized society, and it is in this context that *Escola Sem Partido* has gained popularity. The movement's agenda and the dissemination of its discourse has worked to deepen the common fears of backlash and job instability among Brazilian teachers, a reality that has led many of them to self-censor (Alves Maia Junior, 2022; Caetano, 2021).

Additionally, this literature review highlights what scholars consider the best approaches to teaching controversial historical issues especially in polarized societies. McCully (2012) argues in favour of an inquiry-based, multi-perspective teaching methodology. Kambylas and Kambani (2012) affirm the importance of devoting attention to the role of teachers and students' emotions when teaching such issues. Gil and Camargo (2018) advocate for the importance of embracing uncomfortable feelings toward controversial historical topics as a pedagogical strategy for stimulating students' critical judgment and skills in interpretation. Nevertheless, history and social study teachers might not, and often do not opt for such approaches because they may seem too risky. Around the world, teachers face multiple external and institutional pressures that result in extra — and largely unacknowledged — labour when planning their lessons and carrying out the curriculum. Teachers often receive no training in how to navigate and make sense of real professional challenges that carry the fear of job instability and community backlash. As

Washington and Humphries' (2011) and Hess' (2004) studies' demonstrate, even addressing seemingly uncontroversial subjects or adopting a balanced approach to the curriculum can be perceived as propaganda or indoctrination to some students or parents.

The literature review also demonstrates that the challenges that Brazil's sociopolitical climate poses for history teachers are similar to the challenges social studies teachers face worldwide. According to McAvoy and Hess (2013), it is common for many Americans to believe history and social studies teachers are particularly inclined to use the classroom to advance personal agendas. In this respect, parents and students may judge the interpretive character of history as non-scientific or non-objective, which might contribute to a perception that history teachers' interpretations of evidence through a theoretical framework are merely their opinions, or even part of a "suspicious agenda." When scientism meets conservatism and far-right values — as in the case of *Escola Sem Partido* in Brazil — virtually any position a teacher takes in the class can be labelled as indoctrination for some group.

Finally, the findings of this literature review advance the two-part study presented in this thesis. In the first part of this study, I conducted a discourse analysis of *Escola Sem Partido*'s texts, aiming to address the gaps in the literature in understanding the movement's ideas about history education and indoctrination. In part two, I conduct a case study of two history teachers regarding their conceptualization of the movement, and its impacts on how they teach controversial topics. In this way, the discussion of the findings intersects with the literature on *Escola Sem Partido* and with the teaching of controversial issues.

## Chapter 3

### Theoretical perspectives

Three theoretical perspectives guide my political and intellectual commitments, as well as my methodological choices for this research. First, I base my understanding of education and social relations on the broad framework of critical pedagogy, and more specifically on the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian critical educator whose contributions are foundational for understanding Brazilian society and its educational system. Additionally, I engage with the theoretical perspectives of historical consciousness (Rüsen, 2004; Zanzanian, 2015; 2019), and with conceptualizations of social life, meaning-making, and ideology from discourse analysis, particularly from the social psychology tradition (Billig, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 2001; Wetherell & Potter, 1998).

According to Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011), researchers who engage or operate within a critical pedagogical framework understand that their work is historically situated, and they “often regard their work as a first step toward forms of political action that can redress the injustices found in the field site, or constructed in the very act of research itself” (p. 167). This understanding inspires my positioning in relation to my research topic and the two research participants in the sense that I acknowledge that my interest in pursuing this research at this given time is not dispassionate, but rather reflects a desire to examine, raise awareness about, and to act upon a problematic educational and social issue.

In this sense, foundational to critical-pedagogical-oriented research is the understanding that education and formal educational systems are culturally and historically situated and are always embedded in the fabric of society. Some ideologies and “common sense” assumptions influence educational practice, but they are often taken as essential “truths” of social life and

educational practice because they have become normalized. In this sense, the work of critical pedagogical researchers and teachers begins by rejecting “reality as given in the name of reality to be produced” (Greene, 1973, p. 7), and by examining the hidden ideologies of everyday commonsensical practices (Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg, 2011, p. 165). Such a rejection implies an understanding of certain practices or patterns in social reality as being constructions sustained by historicized practices, rather than being some kind of “normal,” i.e. natural, state of affairs. Thus, in contrast to understanding reality as something immutable, a critical pedagogical stance conceptualizes reality as actionable upon.

Integral to a critical pedagogical stance are both self-reflection and autonomy, as opposed to alienation and authoritarianism. According to Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011), through the lens of critical pedagogy, teachers are viewed as learners, researchers, and knowledge workers who are self-reflective and aware of the complexities intrinsic to their practice and to the institutions in which they work (p. 166). In this sense, the two teachers that participated in this research are regarded as active knowledge producers engaged in a self-reflective process.

Reflection, critical thinking, autonomy, and consciousness-raising are all crucial concepts in the work of Paulo Freire. According to him, the goals of education should be to raise people’s consciousness so that they both become aware of their position as subjects in society and can acknowledge the possibility of acting upon social reality and transforming it by realizing that reality is not given, but rather historically constituted (Freire, 2018). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that “for apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire, 1999, p. 72). People would become aware of their location in time and space

through radical educational praxis. By critically analyzing the materiality of their living conditions, they would recognize themselves as historically situated beings able to act towards their liberation.

It is important to note that Freirean thought is deeply informed by its understanding of the specificity of time, space, and historicity. According to Soares (2020), for Freire, students' sense-making of the content they learn in school is informed by a dialogical relationship between their personal historical experiences and the school curriculum. Soares argues that in the process of consciousness-raising, students necessarily develop their historical thinking (p. 79). Soares develops this argument based on Freire's statement that consciousness-raising is an historical duty, as well as an expression of historical consciousness as it enables one's critical insertion in history, implying that people can "assume the role of subjects who make and remake the world." (Freire, 1979, p.15 as cited by Soares, 2020, p. 81). Consciousness-raising and historical consciousness are interconnected in Freire's thought.

Historical consciousness, the second theoretical perspective that guides this research, follows from the previous discussion. Through this theoretical framework, I examine the role history plays in social life; that is to say, how making meaning of history informs how people orient themselves in their social contexts, how they make sense of their daily lives, and how they determine the course of their actions. According to the historian Jörn Rüsen, far from being only "the past," history is "a relationship between past and present, that has a realistic nature as a temporal chain of conditions and at the same time an 'idealistic' or symbolic nature as an interpretation that bears meaning for the purpose of cultural orientation and charges it with norms and values, hopes and fears." (Rüsen, 2006, p. 3). Through this perspective, the past is "always already present in - and interrelated with - daily life" (Rüsen, 2017, p. 13) and people draw on the past to both understand the present and to anticipate and plan for the future. This implies that



people make meaning of their historical experience within their social contexts, and this has effects on both internal (identity) and external orientation (practice) in time (p. 18).

Historical consciousness, then, renders “present actuality intelligible while fashioning its future perspectives” (Rüsen, 2004, p. 67). This capacity for orientation is operationalized by individuals through their ability to realize an “historical synthesis of the dimensions of time simultaneous with those of value and experience” (idem, p. 69) through the form of narrative, that is, the act of telling a story. Rüsen describes this as the narrative competence of historical consciousness. In this sense, narratives are a privileged medium for analyzing historical consciousness, in addition to their general function of orienting practical life. Additionally, according to the author, historical consciousness has different structural stages of development — characterized by the traditional, exemplary, critical, and genetic types — and it orients practical life in four different ways that are related to four distinct principles for temporal orientation in life, namely: “(a) affirmation of given orientations, (b) regularity of cultural patterns and life patterns (Lebensformen), (c) negation, and (d) transformation of topical orientating patterns” (p. 71).

Similarly, for Zanazanian (2019), historical consciousness “refers to an individual’s capacity to mobilize (pre-given) notions/significations of the past — understood as requisite conceptual resources — for making the necessary ethical, practical or political choices for orienting oneself in given social relationships” (p. 852). Zanazanian argues that the way people intellectualize history’s workings for such orienting purposes represents “embodiments of larger cultural modes of thought” (p. 851), that is to say, an incognizant pattern that points to how people mobilize their understanding of history to think and act in given situations. These patterns can be examined through the concept of history-as-interpretive-filter templates, an analytical device that

examines the way people's mental schemas make meaning of history's life-orienting purposes (idem).

Ideas about discourse analysis underlie my theoretical understanding of discourse and social life, and they bridge the two frameworks described above (Billig, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 2001; Wetherell & Potter, 1998). As researchers who work with discourse analysis affirm, conceptualizations of what discourse is and what would constitute discourse analysis vary immensely according to the researcher's particular field, and to the traditions with which one is more aligned (Potter et al., 1990, p. 206). The understandings of discourse that help me frame my commitments to this research are informed by some of the debates from the social psychology tradition.

Through this framework, I approach language as always constructive and consequential. I work with the understanding that an account varies according to its function, and, consequently, it constructs versions of the social world. In this sense, language is not a neutral medium that merely describes phenomena. On the contrary, Wetherell and Potter (1998) point to the "action orientation" of discourse, and they conceptualize discourse as a social practice in itself. Therefore, a central conception is that texts are organized differently according to their different functions, thus leading to different consequences as a result.

Based on this understanding, a text is organized from the existing linguistic resources in addition to cultural and social resources. In this way, texts and meanings are constructed in relation to both local and broader discursive systems, encompassing cultural patterns and ideologies. According to Billig (2001), individual speech employs terms "which are culturally, historically and ideologically available" (p. 217); this suggests that implicit in every speech act is an ideological history of both the speaker and the society in which they live. For this reason, analysing

a text beyond its immediate context is necessary because it enables an understanding of how this ideological dimension embedded in the text or speech both shapes and is shaped by discourse and practices.

Finally, my understanding of discourse and social life has also been informed by the critical discourse analysis tradition, particularly the work of the linguist Norman Fairclough with respect to his conceptualizations of power and ideology in discourse. For Fairclough, discourse both mediates social practice and contributes to the reproduction of social structures. And perhaps most importantly, he argues that power is always a defining feature of discourse. It is an assumption of this study, in accordance with Fairclough, that discourse can be a place where relations of power are enacted, and where orders of discourse are themselves shaped and constituted by relations of power (Fairclough, 2001, p. 36).

In summary, the theoretical perspectives presented in this section inform my understanding of education, historical consciousness, teaching, and research. My understanding of reality's historical constitution, the workings of language and ideology, and history's orienting purpose in social life are inter-connected. In this research, my understanding of language as always constructive informs my interest in exploring *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse. The conceptualization of historical consciousness and history's orienting purpose inform my investigation of how the teacher-participants in this study mobilize their understanding of history to position themselves in relation to *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse. Critical Pedagogy mediates my reading of the context, as it informs my understanding of reality and education. Therefore, the three theoretical perspectives are inter-connected in all aspects of my research. In the next chapter, I connect the theoretical perspectives that underpin this research to the methodology and methods employed in it.

## Chapter 4

### Methodology

The theoretical perspectives delineated in the previous chapter inform the methodological decisions I took when planning and executing this research. They influenced my decision to conduct qualitative research where the inquiry focused on teachers' sense-making of how the sociopolitical context and particular discourses about education impacted their practice. In addition, I was inspired by critical pedagogy's focus on dialogue, as well as its commitment to disrupting the banking model's power dynamics and logic embedded in traditional research dynamics (Freire, 1999). Consequently, all research participants were considered as co-constructors of the research data, and not merely as passive objects. Additionally, the preference for research methods that privileged teachers' narratives was also meant to provide entry points into participants' historical consciousness. Texts — written and spoken — were analyzed in light of the interconnectedness of language, culture, power, and ideology.

I conducted a two-part, small-scale qualitative study in order to understand teachers' experiences and sense-making, and to consider their levels and kinds of self-reflection. First, I analyzed *Escola Sem Partido's* texts to produce a detailed account of the movement's discourse, as well as the consequences of that discourse on how history teachers are perceived. Building on the knowledge constructed from this first phase, I focused on the experiences of two history teachers in relation to *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse as a case study. This option allowed for an in-depth exploration and understanding of the teachers' experiences. The inquiry strategy adopted for this part of the research is an analysis of a 'two-case' case study — a collective case study, or multiple-case study (Creswell, 2007) — to explore the issue of the impact of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse on history teachers, through an in-depth analysis of the teachers' cases. In this respect, the teachers' cases can be considered as instrumental (Stake, 1995), both in terms of the analysis

of each, and in relation to each other, as they provide both a profound understanding of their situations, and an entry point into the discussion of the issue. Thus, the goal was not to collect generalizable data, but rather to give voice to a rich and profound analysis of the experiences of two teachers who are immersed in the social context under study.

To examine the ideas about teaching and education put forth by *Escola Sem Partido*, I conducted a discourse analysis of texts that are foundational to the movement. My methodological decisions for data analysis were inspired by Billig (2001), and Wetherell & Potter (1998). As further explained below, I designed analytical questions to collect data inspired by the analytical principles delineated by these authors for understanding the variation of the language in texts, and its effects on meaning-making, and for investigating patterns of ideology. Such an analysis is meant to show how *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse structures social values and assumptions about education and history teaching.

The methodology selected to analyze the participants' data is an adaptation of the one designed by Zanzanian (2019) for examining historical consciousness through history-as-interpretive-filter templates. As Zanzanian's methodology was developed to investigate "the impact of individuals' historical consciousness on their epistemic positioning when faced with social problems of a historical character" (2019, p. 850), adapting its methods was particularly well-suited to this research for analyzing how teachers' epistemological understanding of history guides their positioning in relation to *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse about teachers and education, as well as their own teaching practices. Such a methodological approach allows for an in-depth analysis and cross-comparison of each case. As such, the research findings can provide context-specific answers to the research questions, which in turn can contribute to the development

of new key questions that can perhaps lead to the generation of theories that can help conceptualize the subject under study more broadly, as is generally the aim of case studies (Yin, 2003).

#### **4.1 Research context and participants**

To understand the phenomena being studied, I analyzed the narratives of two high school history teachers from a city in a southern state in Brazil. I chose this city for two reasons. Firstly, because an *Escola-Sem-Partido*-inspired educational policy proposal was discussed in its city's council for many years and was only recently rejected. Secondly, because the state's legislative assembly, to which this city belongs, also discussed an *Escola-Sem-Partido*-inspired educational policy and, in a tight decision, voted against it. Additionally, it should be noted that even without the official approval of such policies, there is documented evidence that teachers both from this city and throughout this southern state have been facing administrative and judicial consequences as a result of being denounced for alleged indoctrination. These situations demonstrate that *Escola Sem Partido*'s ideology and the discourse that espouses it impacts both politicians' and the population's ideas about teaching and schooling.

To participate in this study, teachers needed to have at least six years of practice. The intention of this criterion was to investigate the experience of teachers who began their careers before the rise of *Escola Sem Partido* on the national level. The assumption here is that teachers who fit this criterion would be in a position to reflect on how the rise of *Escola Sem Partido*'s prominence has impacted their sense of agency regarding curriculum and classroom practice. There was no selection criterion regarding participants' gender, race, age, class, or sexuality.

The selection process for potential research participants began after the research project was approved by McGill University's Research Ethics Board and the *Comissão Nacional de Ética em Pesquisa* [National Committee of Ethics in Research], with the particular Brazilian State's

Education Secretariat forwarding emails to history teachers informing them about the research project. Additionally, I sent emails to relevant educational institutions asking them to publicize the proposed research study. The teachers interested in participating in the study contacted me directly via email. I had to decline the offer from the first teacher who contacted me to participate in the study, because they taught a subject other than history. Subsequently, I was contacted by two high-school history teachers who met the criteria for the study. Camilo has been a history teacher for 14 years. For the past nine years, he has taught in a learning institution that offers different degrees, including professional vocational education and high school education degrees. Mauro has been a history teacher for seven years and teaches at a regular public school. To protect the two teachers' confidentiality, the names used in this thesis are pseudonyms.

Before proceeding to a description of the data collection and analytical processes, it is first necessary to position myself in relation to the research context and participants. As a woman born in a Southern Brazilian state and educated to be a history teacher in the same region, my positionality provides clear connections to the research context and participants. However, these connections are mitigated by my limited experience working as a history teacher as well as my current status as a researcher in a Canadian university, both of which serve to distance me from the research participants' experiences. Additionally, I recognize that the relationship between the researcher and their research participants can be impacted by a power imbalance. However, as described above, my commitment to critical pedagogy and to understanding my relationship with the research participants is an ethical commitment to dialogue – in which both parties teach and learn through the exchange.

## 4.2 Data collection

I begin by describing the process and criteria used in selecting the documents that compose the set of foundational texts for the *Escola Sem Partido* movement. Given that I am concerned with understanding how this movement constructs and propagates messages about (history) teaching and education through its discourse, I opted for analyzing a large set of data from multiple media sources. I gathered documents from the movement's website, YouTube videos, and news articles about their attempts to make their educational views official policy as evidenced by debates in legislative chambers at the federal, state, and municipal level. I searched for these documents on Google and on *Escola Sem Partido's* website because these two sources provided the most accessible and widely dispersed texts from and about the movement. I used the key terms "*Escola Sem Partido*," "professores de história" (history teachers) and "ideologia" (ideology) to search for relevant data. I selected documents that expressed the movement's and its supporters' vision about teachers, education, indoctrination, and their specific vision of history and history teachers.

The data from research participants was collected through three different procedures: 1) an initial semi-structured in-depth interview; 2) the writing of a reflection journal; and 3) a second semi-structured in-depth follow-up interview. These methods are inspired by Zanzanian's (2019) methodology. In his conceptualization of the use of history-as-interpretive-filter for "investigating how mental functioning related to history affects individuals' ability to navigate social reality" (p. 850), Zanzanian suggests that to get access to participants' mental schemas used for orientation, it is necessary to first "decipher history-as-interpretive-filter's narrative templates that emerge regarding research participants' understandings of history's intellectual uses" (p. 856), and to correlate and synthesize these understandings "with what surfaces in research participants' conscious thinking about history's workings and its intellectual affordances and opportunities" (p.



857). In this undertaking, the author uses written reflections as data collection methods. First, research participants respond to a “carefully crafted guided reflection piece” (p. 856), which asks them to “describe a lived experience where they had to justify the importance of sharing historical knowledge in a situational context that required the mobilization of history for fostering (positive) change” (p. 856). This inspired my decision to require participants to write a reflection journal. Next, according to Zanzanian’s methodology, the research participants answer follow-up questions that are meant to address their “overall (cognitive) uses of history and draw out their considered understandings for making decisions and effectuating positive change” (p. 857). This step inspired the design of the semi-structured interviews I undertook in my study.

Clearly, the methods I chose for data collection for this research project are profoundly inspired by Zanzanian’s (2019) methodology. However, some adaptations were required, given that these procedures could only partially address the research questions central to this project. To recapitulate, the purpose of this thesis is the following: 1) to explore how history teachers conceptualize and resist the impact of *Escola Sem Partido*’s discourse on how they teach controversial historical issues; and 2) to comprehend how their epistemological understanding of history and education influence their positioning in this matter. Zanzanian’s methodology is particularly well-suited to address the second purpose. At the same time, I needed to expand the scope of the writing reflection piece and the interviews to inquire into how the participants’ understanding of history orients their teaching decisions and understandings of themselves as history teachers. In this sense, the interviews and the written reflection for this project were meant to give access to both participants’ history-as-interpretive-filter cognitive templates used for orientation, and to their positioning in relation to both history and education. Additionally, some

interview questions were meant to address the first purpose listed above: to explore the impact of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse on these teachers and to promote their self-reflection about it.

In summary, the data collection procedure proceeded in the following way: first, the participants participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which were recorded. The questions participants responded to concerned two main themes: a) the participants' own understanding of the role of history, of history education, and of their role as educators; and b) the participants' perceptions regarding *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse's impact on their own practice. For instance, the teachers were asked to comment on what they consider to be the underlying purpose of school and education, including history classes in general and their own classes in particular, and then to comment on their reading of *Escola Sem Partido*'s educational discourse, both in relation to Brazil's sociopolitical context for education, and to its impacts on their own teaching. The teachers were also asked to evaluate how their position as history teachers might impact their reading in such a context.

Next, the participants wrote responses to a guided reflection journal. For this step, the participants were asked to read an excerpt of a text from or about *Escola Sem Partido* and to: a) explain whether the excerpt sparked any emotion in them; b) reflect on how their understanding of history guides their understanding of the excerpt; c) write about a specific situation in their career that the excerpt reminded them of. As discussed above, this step is inspired by Zanazanian's (2019) methodology. In the article in which Zanazanian first develops this methodology, the author reports on a study in which he asked the research participants to write about a lived incident in which they (or someone they know) "had to share aspects of English-speaking Quebec's history and to prove its importance in terms of community survival" (2019, p. 860). This written piece provided an entry point for the participants' uses of history as an intellectual mode of thought that

informed their decision-making regarding the issue being analyzed. I built on this technique for my study, adapting it to my research goals. By asking participants to react to an excerpt from *Escola Sem Partido*, my first goal was to gain more insight into their perceptions of the movement. By asking them to describe an experience this excerpt reminded them of, I sought to understand how their epistemological understanding of history influenced their positioning regarding this matter.

Subsequently, a second interview was recorded. The teachers re-evaluated their reflections based on their written narratives, and they discussed their approaches to teaching controversial historical issues in more depth. The questions for this interview were meant to provide entry points into the teachers' teaching approaches, and their evaluation of how *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse might have affected them. For instance, the teachers were asked to comment on their usual teaching practices regarding controversial historical issues, and to comment on their written exercise, reflecting on whether their understanding of history and the role of teachers impacted their position in relation to the situation they described.

### **4.3 Data analysis**

I conducted a discourse analysis on the textual data concerning *Escola Sem Partido*. This analysis was inspired by the framework discussed in the theoretical perspective section, (Billig, 2001; Fairclough, 2001; Wetherell & Potter, 1998). The questions guiding my analysis are as follows: a) what is *Escola Sem Partido's* conception of education as presented in the selected texts? b) how does the movement characterize indoctrination in the texts, and how does this conceptualization relate to history teaching? c) how do the texts construct history teachers as subjects? And d) what cues do the texts give us to determine what is considered controversial in history teaching according to *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse?

For this analysis, I first read the selected documents paying close attention to language use, as I considered this discourse to be the primary research focus. I analyzed the variation in the content of texts to understand their intended function in their given context (Potter & Wetherell, 1994). To accomplish this, I examined the cultural and ideological repertoires the texts build on to craft their message, and I sought to contextualize the texts regarding historical, cultural, and political events in which they might be embedded (Billig, 2001). To investigate patterns of ideology, I conducted a rhetorical analysis of how the arguments are developed in texts (Rapley, 2018). My focus was on identifying what arguments were left unchallenged, and which were presented as unchallengeable, or assumed to be beyond controversy in a text (Billig, 2001).

For example, after an initial reading of the data, I noticed that a common theme in *Escola Sem Partido's* texts is the idea that history textbooks are vehicles for leftist indoctrination. To better understand both how this idea is constructed and the role it plays in the movement's discourse, I grouped together all texts that included this theme, and then I proceeded to a second reading. During this phase, I read the texts looking for patterns of argumentation and variations in language. In a third reading, I analyzed the arguments used across the set of texts to identify which ones seemed to be construed as common sense or beyond controversy for the movement regarding this theme. Next, I contextualized these arguments with respect to the historical, cultural, and ideological repertoires upon which they might be built. Next, I compared my findings for this theme to the others I had identified. Through this process, I perceived that the theme, "history textbooks are vehicles of leftist indoctrination" is a crucial assertion in *Escola Sem Partido's* discussions, and that it is characteristic of the way much of the movement's discourse functions. In all the texts concerning this theme found on the movement's webpage, the idea that history textbooks further leftist indoctrination is understood as self-evident and uncontroversial. The same

dynamic is at work when the movement advances and affirms the idea that (leftist) indoctrination is “disseminated across all [of the Brazilian] school system (“Programa Escola sem Partido,” n.d.). No evidence is provided to support such affirmations because they are understood as common knowledge, such as in the following sentence: “Nowadays, no one ignores that textbooks are being used as vehicles for disseminating left-wing ideas, that is, as a facilitator to the militant teacher’s task in the classroom.” (“Debate sobre doutrinação ideológica na Revista Época (outubro/2007) – final,” 2012). In summary, my analytical approach consisted of multiple readings with different focuses to ensure that the elements I identified were representative of *Escola Sem Partido’s* discourse. I analyzed each text individually with the aim of “both reading with and against the grain of the text and focusing on how the different elements work together” (Rapley, 2018, p. 10), and I both identified and named patterns in the discourse found across the documents.

The data involving the teachers was analyzed as follows. First, I transcribed the initial interviews. I then read the transcriptions looking for patterns and common themes among the teachers’ experiences. Next, I read the participants’ written reflection journals. I compared them to the first interviews, again looking for patterns and common themes while also uncovering the narrative schema and cultural tools the teachers draw on in constructing their narratives, inspired here by Zanzanian’s (2019) methodology. Finally, I transcribed the final interviews and analyzed them for common patterns and themes. In attempting to address the first research question, each teacher’s set of interviews and written reflections were both analyzed as a unit to promote an understanding of their individual experience, and they were also compared to each other to further an understanding of the relationship between their cases. The analytical process was inspired by constant comparison inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2018; Gibbs, 2018). According to Butler-Kisber, this is a “form of qualitative work that uses categorizing, or the comparing and contrasting of units and

categories of field texts, to produce conceptual understandings of experiences and/or phenomena that are ultimately constructed into large themes” (2018, p. 13). The teachers’ data was read multiple times and categorized according to emerging similarities. These categories were given analytical definitions. Once the comparison process reached saturation, the categories were analyzed in relationship to each other.

To address the second research question, I followed an interpretive approach, utilizing narrative structural analysis and cross-comparison inquiry to analyze the data (Zanazanian, 2019). With reference to the narrative structural analysis, I first approached the data aiming to “draw out core storyline scripts that surface[d]” (Zanazanian, 2019, p. 856) in participants’ oral and written accounts in order to decode the “history-as-interpretive-filter’s narrative templates” (idem) that emerged from the participants’ narratives. These templates refer to the schemas participants used to engage with history and to consequently make sense of the world and act upon it. The analysis focused on identifying the “functions of the actions attributed to history that surface in research participants’ narratives” (idem), and then examining how these functions related to the functions attributed to education and teacher education. Next, I focused on distilling “the main functions attributed to history that surface[d]” (p. 857) in the narratives to group similar templates between the two participants, and then to identify them inductively following Zanazanian’s (2019) approach. In sequence, I compared the templates to the participants’ epistemic understanding of history and education, coded inductively from the interview questions. Through this method of data analysis, I identified teachers’ incognizant understandings of history, and I analyzed how they articulate their epistemic understanding of history to generate an inductive explanation of how they position themselves in relation to *Escola Sem Partido*.

## Chapter 5

### ***Escola Sem Partido: the construction of enemies and saviours in Brazilian education***

In this chapter, I analyze the discourses about education and schooling as constructed in *Escola Sem Partido* texts, focusing in particular on those related to history teaching. Whereas these texts are informed and sustained by popular conservative discourses about education, they also operate as the very fuel for such discourses; this mutually reinforcing dynamic has the effect of normalizing the ideologies embedded in them. The next step undertaken is to unpack *Escola Sem Partido*'s core assumptions about the workings of education and history education as expressed in the movement's texts, and to explore how such ideas work to construct "history teachers" as subjects.

For the purposes of this study, I have analyzed 29 texts produced by or about *Escola Sem Partido*. I found and selected these documents by searching the key terms "*Escola Sem Partido*," "professores de história" (history teachers) and "ideologia" (ideology) on both Google's search engine and *Escola Sem Partido*'s website. I used this method because it provided me with the most accessible texts for an experienced internet user interested in this topic. These texts include videos, documents, websites, news articles from government agencies, policy papers, and blog articles published between 2011 and 2020. The documents express the movement's and its supporters' vision about teachers, education, and indoctrination in general, as well as their specific vision of history and history teachers. The variety of media analyzed allows for an examination and understanding of the variation of language use and its relation to the function and consequent construction of social reality (Wetherell & Potter, 1998).

As the chapter's goal is to understand the ideological formulations that both enable the movement's discourse and are actively constructed through the sustained production of texts by

the movement, it required me to analyze the 29 texts not only as a product or reflection of a particular ideology about education, but also as an active contribution to the construction and normalization of that very ideology. To this end, I explored the cultural and ideological assumptions the texts rest and build on to express and convey their message, contextualizing them to the historical, cultural, and political events in which they might be intertwined (Billig, 2001). I read the texts multiple times, looking for patterns and paying attention to the variation in language employed as well as its effects on meaning-making. To investigate patterns of ideology, I conducted a rhetorical analysis of the texts' arguments. My focus was on identifying what was left unchallenged, presented as unchallengeable, or assumed to be beyond controversy in relation to education, history teachers and history teaching (Billig, 2001). Chapter 4 below provides a detailed description of this methodology, with an example of my analytical process (see pp 56-67).

Given that one of the main objectives of this research is to understand how history teachers conceptualize and resist the impact of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse on how they teach controversial historical issues, this chapter is intended to scrutinize *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse about education and how it constructs history teachers as subjects. This analysis is foundational to understanding the discursive framework that permeates the interactions between history teachers, parents, students, and society. And it enables a better understanding of the experiences of the two history teachers who participate in this study, as it lays out the context in which they interact in their testimonies.

In this chapter, I intend to answer the following analytical questions: What is *Escola Sem Partido's* conceptualization of education as presented and reflected in the texts? How does the movement understand indoctrination in the texts, and how does this understanding relate to history



teaching? How do the texts construct history teachers as subjects? What cues do the texts give us as to what can be considered controversial in history teaching according to the movement?

### **5.1 How does *Escola Sem Partido* present itself?**

In this section, I address *Escola Sem Partido*'s conceptualization of education, as presented in the texts, by exploring how the movement presents itself and justifies its existence. I argue that *Escola Sem Partido*'s texts construct both the idea that Brazilian education is highly affected by “ideological indoctrination,” and the idea that the movement has the solution to combat this indoctrination. In describing the goals and the reasons for its existence, *Escola Sem Partido*'s texts portray the movement as an upholder of pre-established standards of teaching against the challenge of political (leftist) indoctrination, which is perceived in its texts as “disseminated across all [of the Brazilian] school system (‘Programa Escola Sem Partido’, n.d.).

In the following two extracts from the section “Quem somos” (Who we are) on *Escola Sem Partido*'s website, these forms of self-representation are evident:

Escola Sem Partido, it is a conjunct initiative of students and parents worried about the degree of political-ideological contamination of Brazilian schools, in all levels (‘Quem somos’, n.d.)

What can be done to curb this intolerable abuse of the freedom to teach, which develops in the secrecy of classrooms, and victimizes vulnerable individuals in the process of formation?

Nothing is simpler: just inform and educate students about their right not to be indoctrinated by their teachers; it is enough to inform and educate teachers about the ethical and legal limits of their freedom to teach.

That is, and only that, what Escola Sem Partido proposes in the projects of bills below (‘Quem somos’, n.d.)

In the context they are presented, these extracts demonstrate *Escola Sem Partido*'s conscious efforts to create an identity for the movement by stating who the people behind it are, what they do, and who or what they are against. It is notable that in both extracts, *Escola Sem Partido* justifies its existence by overstating the presence of indoctrination in schools as both

widespread and obscure. *Escola Sem Partido* frames the school as a site of potential danger for students. Interestingly, similar portraits of schools can be seen in comparable texts of ideologically-alike organizations in the United States (Apple & Oliver, 1996). Notably, in *Escola Sem Partido's* texts, there is no clear definition of indoctrination, or how it might be enacted in schools. This suggests that such a definition is not necessary for the movement's identity.

The texts presented here disseminate assumptions about schooling that, although not verifiable, assume the status of truth for those engaged in these discussions as they are constantly reproduced in the movement's discourse. This might be the case because the constant reproduction of such assumptions as truth works to normalize their narrative claims (Shotwell, 2015, p. 42). In this case, the narrative claim being normalized is that of *Escola Sem Partido* being presented as a humble opponent struggling against an omnipresent enemy.

## **5.2 The forces *Escola Sem Partido* constructs itself in opposition to**

In this section, I address how *Escola Sem Partido* conceptualizes indoctrination and how its conceptualization relates to history teaching, how *Escola Sem Partido's* texts construct history teachers as subjects, and what cues the texts give us as to what can be considered controversial in history teaching. Upon analysis, it becomes evident that the movement's texts, in essence, utilize dichotomous rhetoric. The effect of such rhetoric in the movement's discourse is the representation of history teachers as the antithesis of the movement, and the implicit assertion that any view or position on a topic that contrasts with *Escola Sem Partido's* conservative and right-wing values is both implicitly controversial and reprehensible in the context of the history classroom.

### *5.2.1 Construction of indoctrination*

*Escola Sem Partido's* alleged reason for existence is the supposed widespread "ideological contamination" of learning institutions in Brazil. Despite rarely defining what is meant by either

ideology or indoctrination, and despite presenting no credible evidence that supports this claim (as shown in Carvalho Silva, 2020; Daltoé & Ferreira, 2019; Gemelli, 2020), *Escola Sem Partido* produces overwhelming quantities of texts that have the potential to work to constitute and normalize the idea that schools are sites of (leftist) indoctrination<sup>5</sup>. The circulation of such ideas also works to legitimize *a priori* the suspicion of any and all teacher's intention to indoctrinate students, especially history teachers, as history teaching is considered a privileged site for indoctrination by *Escola Sem Partido* (Moura, 2016). This contention is supported by my analysis of the movement's texts, as I have observed that the idea that history teachers most likely act as indoctrinators is a taken-for-granted assumption embedded within *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse. Additionally, as I discuss below, according to *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse, the entirety of the Brazilian educational apparatus works in complicity with teachers' supposed ideals of (leftist) indoctrination. Such conspiracy theories have particular implications for history teachers.

Firstly, *Escola Sem Partido*'s texts are worded so that the "contamination" of schools by ideology and ideological indoctrination is not a matter of supposition, or something to be verified, but taken as a common-sense perception. Common-sense here is understood to be an implicit, taken-for-granted knowledge that mediates one's way of understanding the world (Shotwell, 2015, p. 33). The supposed "contamination" of schools by ideological indoctrination is the taken-for-granted assumption that grounds many of *Escola Sem Partido*'s propositions. This position is evident in the following excerpts:

Is this necessary? [refers to the institution of the *Escola Sem Partido*'s program]  
It would not be necessary if the practice of political and ideological indoctrination in the classroom were not, as it is, disseminated across the educational system. According to the research conducted by Sensus Institute in 2008, 80% of teachers recognize that their

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<sup>5</sup> It is not possible to grasp the full degree of influence of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse over Brazilians' ideas and attitudes toward teachers and education due to the lack of systematic research on the topic. However, there are unarticulated and non-scientifically studied cases that suggest that the movement's discourse might have a considerable impact on how some people interact with or think about teachers (see Alessi, 2019; Betim, 2019).

discourse in class is ‘politically engaged.’ These numbers corroborate the perception of many students and former students, who recognize themselves as victims of political and ideological indoctrination in the classroom. (‘Programa Escola sem Partido’, n.d.)

These practices, however, despite their manifest unconstitutionality and illegality, took over the educational system. Under the pretext of ‘building a fairer society’ or ‘combatting prejudice,’ teachers of all levels have been using the precious time of their classes to ‘make students’ minds up’ on issues of political-partisan, ideological and moral nature. (‘Anteprojeto - Lei Federal’, n.d.)

These excerpts make it clear that teachers’ preoccupation with social justice and equity is what grounds *Escola Sem Partido*’s definition of indoctrination. In opposition, *Escola Sem Partido*’s posits a conception of “true” education as being primarily concerned with the “discovery” of the world as it is. It follows then, that for the movement, the existing social order deemed as natural, and by extension therefore both neutral and non-ideological. It is clear to see then, that *Escola Sem Partido* perceives any educational pedagogy and philosophy that does not correspond to the movement’s conceptions to be ideological and doctrinal *per se*. Section 5.3.1 provides a more detailed discussion of these ideas.

Furthermore, for *Escola Sem Partido*, doctrinal practices in education are linked not only to teachers’ attitudes but also to the authors of textbooks. This suggests that ideological and political indoctrination is an organized political project, as can be seen in the following quote:

**JUSTIFICATION** It is a well-known fact that teachers and textbook authors have been using their classes and works to try to get students to adhere to certain political and ideological currents; and to cause them to adopt standards of judgment and moral conduct—especially sexual morality—incompatible with those taught to them by their parents or guardians. (‘Anteprojeto - Lei Federal’, n.d.)

Many of the movement’s texts articulate and promulgate the idea that textbook authors intentionally produce instruments to support teachers’ attempts to indoctrinate their students. *Escola Sem Partido*’s blog linked to several articles on this topic, and even compiled numerous online comments on a forum about this theme on blog posts from 2012 (‘Debate sobre doutrinação

ideológica na revista *Época* (outubro/2007) - 1ª parte', 2012; 'Debate sobre doutrinação ideológica na revista *Época* (outubro/2007) - 2ª parte', 2012; 'Debate sobre doutrinação ideológica na revista *Época* (outubro/2007) - 3ª parte', 2012; 'Debate sobre doutrinação ideológica na Revista *Época* (outubro/2007) - final', 2012). These posts, centered around the question of adopting certain history textbooks in schools, reveals one of the movement's core assumptions about indoctrination and what they mean by ideology: for the movement's ideologues and supporters, indoctrination is something connected to the political spectrum on the left; and ideology is equated to Marxism. The following excerpt demonstrates how these connections are evident in the movement's discourse:

Nowadays, no one ignores that the textbook is being used as a vehicle for disseminating left-wing ideas, that is, as a facilitator of the militant teacher's task in the classroom. If this is not intended to train cadres for left-wing parties, what is the use then? I myself answer: it also serves—and mainly—, in the opinion of the ideologues and educators who conceived this strategy, for the formation of a hegemonic thought: when everyone hates capitalism and loves socialism, it will ultimately triumph. I don't believe this will happen, but Gramsci did and so do his followers. ('Debate sobre doutrinação ideológica na Revista *Época* (outubro/2007) - final', 2012)

Central to this view is the idea that educational institutions, the textbook industry, and teachers are part of a coordinated effort to promote a quiet communist revolution – one in which the history textbook and history teachers would play a central role. This view is an expression in Brazil of the notion of *Cultural Marxism*. As Jamin (2014) explains, Cultural Marxism is a concept taken up by the radical right, word-wide, that assumes that “cultural Marxists” are united in their effort to “discredit institutions such as the nation, the homeland, traditional hierarchies, authority, family, Christianity, traditional morality ...” (p. 86) through the manipulation of culture. This idea is recurrent in *Escola Sem Partido's* texts. One example of this can be found in an opinion article written by a famous Brazilian journalist ('Nova História Crítica', 2012) and posted on *Escola Sem Partido's* website, in which Brazilian universities are criticized for teaching student-teachers to

reproduce vulgar Marxism in the classrooms. This accusation, however, is not supported by any evidence in the article. Despite this lack of evidence, the article works to normalize the idea that history teachers are being trained to “contaminate” children’s minds with Marxism, and it can be seen as a clear example of one the core assumptions of *Escola Sem Partido*’s discourse. As the author states: “The result is there. This sloppy Marxism, this ‘didactic militancy,’ this constant depredation of history and traditions ends up, it is certain, contaminating the mentality of children.” (‘Nova História Crítica’, 2012).

In addition to advancing the argument that student-teachers are being trained to become indoctrinators, the excerpt above also provides a view of *Escola Sem Partido*’s idea of history as a fixed constellation of “facts” and traditions to be preserved. This perception of history can be further seen in two other articles written by a Brazilian historian and professor, (‘O conhecimento histórico e a compreensão do passado’, 2011; ‘Para que serve a História?’, 2011), posted on the movement’s website. These articles differ in format and content from the majority of *Escola Sem Partido*’s texts because they offer, to a certain extent, a theoretical discussion that grounds their arguments. Nevertheless, the authors also support a vision of history as a fixed past to be discovered, overlooking or ignoring the existence of multiple interpretations of historical evidence, and disqualifying any historical materialist analysis as inherently “ideological” and, as such, “poor historiography.”

The presence of these articles on *Escola Sem Partido*’s website is curious precisely because of their substantial difference in style. In this sense, it is relevant to hypothesize about the reasons for their publication. One possible explanation is that by publishing such articles, *Escola Sem Partido* is attempting to link their program to the arguments of an “authority figure” who is credentialled in the field of history, an attempt intended to raise the credibility of their other, less

credentialed ideas. As such, the purpose of publishing these articles can be seen as instrumental, i.e., as tools to be used in their debates. Seen in this light, this professor's view of history could be used to justify *Escola Sem Partido's* proposition that Brazilian academic history is "contaminated" by Marxist analysis, and to support their idea that the study of history should only concern itself with the learning of the fixed constellation of facts and traditions to be preserved that, for *Escola Sem Partido*, the study of history constitutes, without reference to the rich complexity that is an integral part of the study of history, and without reference to the role it can play in meaning-making.

Fuelled by such ideas, *Escola Sem Partido* assumes a defensive and reactionary position towards Brazilian learning institutions and teachers, inciting the movement's supporters to denounce, expose, and eliminate any "traces of communist ideology" they find. Similar conspiratorial discourse in Brazil can be traced back to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The idea that Brazil was at risk of the imminent peril of a communist revolution erupting was mobilized to justify the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985) (Duarte, 2011), as well as repressions against activists of the Brazilian Communist Party (Santos, 2012; Silva, 2001), and the surveillance and persecution of teachers and intellectuals during this period (Gomes, 2017).

Many studies argue that history, geography, and social science teachers are the targets of *Escola Sem Partido's* criticism in particular, because these subjects, as opposed to math and science, are inextricably linked with discussions of past and present social issues (Carvalho Silva, 2020; Moura, 2016). It is on this basis that *Escola Sem Partido's* texts depict teachers of such subjects as exceptionally inclined to indoctrinate students. A latent example of this argument can be seen in the following excerpt from a blog post on *Escola Sem Partido's* website:

Here is an excellent example of something that has already been the subject of other texts of mine: the malice of so many professors who use the chair of history for their ideological

purposes, using the insidious attack on religion as their means. They distance young people from the Church and the word of God and introduce them, with the most serious harm, into the rites and devotions of materialism, Marxism and relativism. From there, hedonism is a step away. They dismantle with the feet of lies and mystification what parents have taught at home. They reproach the Church because of the Crusades of the 12th century, but they never mention the 100 million people killed by Communism in the last century. It will take some decades for these young people, now mature, to perceive, in the experience of life, the lure to which they were led by false teachers. Who doesn't have similar reports? (Puggina, 2011).

In this excerpt, the author combines two pillars of *Escola Sem Partido*'s thinking: anti-communism and the championing of conservative values based on their interpretation of Christian morals. Such rhetoric is not unique to *Escola Sem Partido*. As Apple and Oliver (1996) demonstrate, right-wing conservative religious movements in the USA have been long advancing such arguments to organize concerned parents with the aim of influencing educational policies. In this context, *Escola Sem Partido* can be understood as one of the multiple conservative movements worldwide that organize around the idea that the school is a place contaminated by moral decay, and as such is a threat to traditional religious family values. In the excerpt above, the author engages with this idea by using highly charged moral language to connect history teachers to a distorted view of Marxism and communism, one inherently connected to moral depravation. Marxism in these discourses is constituted as inherently bad, amoral, and criminal. The humanities and social sciences are seen as fields in which all propositions are supposedly grounded in Marxism, and, therefore, inherently suspicious. According to this logic, virtually all humanities and social science teachers are equated with Marxists, meaning that at best, they are merely bad and amoral, and at worst, potentially criminal.

#### *5.2.1.2 Teachers as the agents of indoctrination*

In this section, I argue that the most significant effect of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse is not the constitution of all schools as sites dominated by indoctrination, but the constitution of



virtually any and every teacher as a willful indoctrinator. Through the constant devaluation of teachers as professionals, through derogatory metaphors applied to teachers, and through the continuous promotion of the idea that teachers act secretly and mysteriously in classrooms, teachers are constituted in the movement's texts as the villain, in opposition to the hero that *Escola Sem Partido* represents in its simplistically binary rhetoric.

In the following paragraphs, I analyze different excerpts of *Escola Sem Partido*'s texts that have two main functions. The first and more explicit one is to constitute teachers as agents of indoctrination in schools. The second and more ambiguous one is to qualify the meaning of indoctrination as any idea that can be seen as connected to a teaching pedagogy grounded in critical thinking and social justice. Let me first examine an excerpt from *Escola Sem Partido*'s Question and Answers webpage:

Is indoctrination a serious problem in Brazilian education? Why?

Yes, for three reasons.

First, because it is a way of restricting the student's freedom to learn since, in one of its aspects, this freedom—which is expressly guaranteed by the Federal Constitution—comprises the student's right not to be indoctrinated by his teachers. It is, therefore, a violation of a fundamental right.

Second, because the main victims of this practice are young, inexperienced and immature, unable to react, intellectually and emotionally, to a teacher who is determined to change the mind of the students.

And third, due to the extent of the phenomenon: according to a survey carried out by the Sensus Institute, the vast majority of teachers (78%) believe that the main mission of the school is to “awaken the critical awareness of students.” (‘Perguntas e Respostas’, n.d.)

With the three reasons it provides for why indoctrination is a serious problem in Brazilian education, this answer accomplishes four things. First, right at the beginning, the agency of indoctrination is attributed solely to teachers through the affirmation that it is “the student's right not to be indoctrinated by his teachers.” Second, in describing *Escola Sem Partido*'s imagined default interactions between teachers and students in schools, in which students are “young, inexperienced and immature, unable to react, intellectually and emotionally,” and teachers are

“determined to change the mind of the students,” students are pathologized, and represented as incapable beings without agency. This representation works to constitute teachers as people who would willfully take advantage of this supposed essential “truth” about students’ condition in order to “change their minds.” Third, the author states that most teachers are willful indoctrinators by mentioning research that would supposedly prove that most teachers believe the school must change students’ minds. There is no reference to this study’s research questions, objectives or methodology, but the results are treated as the objective truth about teachers in Brazil. Fourth, by saying that “the vast majority of teachers (78%) believe that the main mission of the school is to ‘awaken the critical awareness of students,’” the authors equate awakening students’ critical thinking to an act of indoctrination.

A similar (mis)conception about teachers’ aim to promote critical awareness or critical thinking is expressed in the following two excerpts:

On the pretext of transmitting to students a “critical vision” of reality, an organized army of militants dressed as professors abuse the freedom of professorship and take advantage of the secrecy of the classrooms to impose their own vision of the world on them. (‘Quem somos’, n.d.)

This is the “critical ability” acquired by students throughout elementary and high school. After all, the education system is full of militant professors—almost all of the leftists like you—who use the classroom to lay their ideological eggs on students’ heads, so when they get to your hands, at the university, the little eggs have hatched, and the ideological worms have already devoured most of what should be the true critical capacity of these individuals. (‘Coordenador do ESP debate com dois professores o tema da doutrinação ideológica em sala de aula’, 2014)

Both excerpts present more overtly defamatory metaphors. Teachers are constituted as unprofessional, unethical activists who would willfully take advantage of their positions as teachers to harm their students. Particularly in the second excerpt, teachers are portrayed as vile insects or parasites. Such a characterization of teachers is directly linked to the idea that teachers

act to undermine parents' influence over their children's moral behaviour, as expressed in the following excerpt:

Families are harmed when the moral authority of parents is undermined by teachers who feel they have the right to tell others' children what is right and wrong in moral matters. Instigated by these teachers, many young people begin to question and reject the direction established by their parents in the field of religion, morals and customs, giving rise to serious conflicts within families. (Nagib, 2018)

As opposed to this, in *Escola Sem Partido's* conception and argument for a "non-doctrinal" education, teachers should not have the right to teach or discuss issues that may conflict with parents' moral standards. This means that, for example, teachers are considered to be instilling subversive ideas with the potential (or even with the intention) of destabilizing families when they talk about gender outside of a cis-heteronormative perspective, or when they talk about the Crusades through a lens that does not glorify the Catholic Church, as seen in a previous excerpt. Such an approach imposes significant limitations on history teachers, particularly when teaching about potentially controversial historical issues.

While it is not possible to grasp the influence of *Escola Sem Partido's* ideas on common people's conceptualization of and attitudes towards teachers, it is possible to argue that the movement's texts have worked to advance the idea that teachers are agents of indoctrination in Brazilian schools. In terms of who should be teaching, especially social studies subjects, there are two choices from *Escola Sem Partido's* perspective, either 'good' teachers that agree with the movement's ideals, or bad ones, who are classified as indoctrinators. Following this logic, a teacher's commitment to the movement is the only assurance of their ethical commitment to students' education. Additionally, following *Escola Sem Partido's* dichotomous rhetoric, while the work of teachers who do not act in accordance with the movement's ideals is seen as disruptive to family stability, *Escola Sem Partido* is constructed as an initiative that defends the rights of

families. Although this rhetoric is harmful to teachers of all subjects, history teachers are especially affected because their subject matter often touches on controversial topics, in which conflicts can arise between a student's family's memories and the historiographic debates.

### **5.3 How education should work according to *Escola Sem Partido***

In this section, I finalize my answer to the question of what *Escola Sem Partido*'s conceptualization of education is, as presented in the movement's texts. In the following paragraphs, I argue that the movement articulates a misleading notion of educational neutrality in its texts, a neutrality that ultimately works to maintain the status quo, or even to turn society in a more conservative direction. Additionally, I argue that the movement's texts construct an opposition to critical thinking and social-justice-oriented pedagogical practice.

#### *5.3.1 Escola Sem Partido: objectivism and maintenance of the status quo*

*Escola Sem Partido*'s quest for neutrality in education is, perhaps, the most studied feature of its discourse (Carvalho Silva, 2020; Gemelli, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2019). In the movement's texts, neutrality is the obvious opposite of and response to indoctrination; hence, it is also the obvious recommendation for all teachers, as seen in the following excerpt from a question and answer page on *Escola Sem Partido*'s website:

How to demand that the teacher be neutral when dealing with certain subjects? After all, does neutrality exist?

It is necessary not to confuse the realm of being with the realm of ought to be. The fact that perfect neutrality in science is an unattainable ideal does not exempt the teacher from the duty imposed on everyone to comply with the constitution, respecting the freedom of conscience and belief of students, the pluralism of ideas, impersonality, the right of parents to the religious and moral education of their children, etc. Just as greed does not legitimize theft, the lack of neutrality does not legitimize indoctrination. ('Programa Escola sem Partido', n.d.).

Uncontested in *Escola Sem Partido*'s perspective is the idea that “scientific neutrality”, however unattainable, exists as an ideal, which is emphasized in the following excerpt, from an article written by the movement's founder:

[A]s teachers, they have an ethical and legal obligation to try to discover the truth in everything; the obligation to pursue, with the utmost commitment and sincerity, the ideal of scientific neutrality and objectivity. I would warn you about the vulnerability of the social sciences to ideological contamination; and for those in love with politics, I would advise you to sublimate this feeling or stay away from the classroom. (‘Coordenador do ESP debate com dois professores o tema da doutrinação ideológica em sala de aula’, 2014).

In the context of *Escola Sem Partido*'s texts, being a good teacher means adopting neutrality as the ideal in the quest for an unmediated “Truth.” The underlying assumption of this claim is that there is a universal truth, and the role of the teacher is to transmit this truth to students from a position of neutrality. This serves the additional purpose in the movement's discourse of aligning “neutrality” with the status quo; therefore, any positions which challenge or pose criticisms to it, or which suggest alternative approaches that allow for competing narratives and possibilities, can be dismissed as “ideological” – inherently and ineluctably tainted by the poison of indoctrination. From the movement's perspective, knowledge is not considered to be constructed, and certainly not constructed from different standpoints.

The perspective of education that grounds *Escola Sem Partido*'s assumptions can best be termed as traditional education. Teachers are meant to be knowledge holders, and students are seen as passive receptacles with no active role to play in constructing their own knowledge in dialogue with the teacher. This model of the teacher-student relationship runs through all of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discussions, whether concerning indoctrination or neutrality.

Constructivist perspectives of knowledge, or the idea of a horizontally-oriented pedagogy of dialogue, are not considered or are seen as misleading, ideological subterfuges that lead to leftist indoctrination (da Silva Azevedo, 2019). Thus, adopting a positivist perspective of knowledge,

combined with a traditional and hierarchical view of the student-teacher relationship, is seen as the only possible way to teach, if one is to teach “ethically”, i.e., in a way that maintains the status quo. Consequently, in their fight against supposedly doctrinal postures, *Escola Sem Partido*’s is not interested in transforming the student-teacher relationship, or in adopting dialogical and dialectical pedagogies – which critical pedagogy educators propose (see Freire, 2018). Rather, they set their aim on the censorship of certain themes within the classroom.

Indeed, in light of *Escola Sem Partido*’s definition of what is considered to be indoctrination, and its assumptions about the nature of education, it is not surprising that the movement moves to censor debates in the classroom, rather than promote dialogical pedagogies, which carry the potential to transform the hierarchy of social relations. Because *Escola Sem Partido* arguably wants precisely the opposite, it acts to defend the current social hierarchy, and the morality that underpins it. The current social order is viewed as natural and correct, and therefore anti-ideological by definition. Ideological then, would be defined by anything that is in opposition to the natural social order; and by extension should be condemned as pernicious. In this sense, understanding school relationships as only possible through a traditional perspective is obviously not a contradiction in *Escola Sem Partido*’s discourse because such a perspective is not seen as ideological, given that it is a way of instilling and enacting precepts that sustain the social order — which in turn is constituted as the natural order for *Escola Sem Partido*’s supporters. The apparent contradiction of a traditionalist and positivist teaching position being constructed as “non-ideological,” despite also being grounded in situated ways of understanding the world, and therefore ideological *per se*, is resolved because it stands in opposition to the inescapably “ideological” nature of critical pedagogy, or other more progressive teaching positions. That is why the top-down teacher-student relationship remains undisputed in the movement’s perspective.

It should come as no great surprise that, from this perspective of education, the key strategy promoted by *Escola Sem Partido* to achieve educational “neutrality” is the surveillance of teachers. Indeed, one of its main demands, both in *Escola Sem Partido*’s draft bill and in multiple other texts, is to make it mandatory for schools to either make available the recording of classes or ensure students have the right to record them (‘Anteprojeto - Lei Estadual’, n.d.; ‘Programa Escola sem Partido’, n.d.). Through the polarized discourse taken up by the movement, the very call for making the recording of classes mandatory works as a tool to increase the level of surveillance on teachers, which in turn increases the likelihood of teachers’ self-censorship.

Clearly, the construction of the call for recordings as an intrinsic right of students shuts down the debate on this topic and puts pressure on teachers. But *Escola Sem Partido*’s counters this claim with their own claim that good and responsible teachers would not fear recordings of their classes (‘Perguntas e Respostas’, n.d.), and that therefore all those teachers who resist mandatory recordings must somehow be suspect, and perhaps even guilty of indoctrination. This position helps to reinforce the fear that teachers are unethical people who would, if given the chance, use class time to instill contentious ideologies in their students’ minds. This social pressure, either direct or indirect, can work to compel teachers to adopt those discourses and teaching practices supported by *Escola Sem Partido*.

As of the writing of this chapter, I have not found a study that has investigated the extent to which critical pedagogy or more progressive pedagogies have indeed been taken up by history teachers in their practice throughout Brazil. There is evidence that from the 1980s onwards, history teachers have been more engaged with constructivist perspectives in history education, as opposed to perspectives based solely on the transmission of knowledge (Pacievitch & Cerri, 2006). The former came to be seen by most history teachers as more suitable than merely memorizing facts

for teaching students how to think historically (Pacievitch & Cerri, 2006). At the same time it is important to note that the literature reports a great plurality of positions and heated debates between teachers that identify with the same pedagogical perspective (Cavalcanti, 2019; Cunha & Cardôzo, 2011; Pacievitch & Cerri, 2006; Palermo, 2021). This demonstrates that there is no consensus among history teachers for how history education should be taught in the country. It follows that there is no evidence to support *Escola Sem Partido's* claim that critical pedagogy has been largely adopted by history teachers. Moreover, even if that were the case, the movement's claims about the supposed widespread "ideological contamination" of learning institutions in Brazil would be an exaggeration because it is not plausible to equate critical pedagogy with indoctrination. Teachers engaged with such an approach acknowledge the intrinsic political nature of the act of teaching, but this does not mean, and there is no evidence to indicate, that these teachers necessarily use their classes to advance a particular political agenda.

As the critical pedagogy scholar Erin L. Castro argues, "there is no 'outside of politics'—no even-handed, ideology-free place from which to teach" (Castro & Brawn, 2017, p. 113). Following the logic of Castro's argument, teachers and students are "always navigating the terrain of ideological warfare," (idem) as knowledge always has a political dimension. This continues to be a characteristic of knowledge and education, whether it is acknowledged or not by so-called neutral pedagogies. In this sense, by acknowledging rather than denying this basic condition, critical pedagogy encourages an ethical teaching practice, as teachers are encouraged to become self-reflective about their teaching (Giroux, 2006; Palermo, 2021). This self-criticism is essential in addressing the inevitable discrepancies that arise between theory and practice.



## 5.4 Concluding Remarks

Before concluding, it is necessary to highlight the extent to which the content of *Escola Sem Partido*'s texts normalize the idea that (leftist) indoctrination is widespread in learning institutions in Brazil, and that history teachers are the most likely ones to practice indoctrination. One possible explanation for the uniformity of this idea in *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse may be found in the movement's unofficial character. Given that the movement's ideas are mostly shared on the internet, there are no strict criteria for their veracity, or any necessity for them to be vetted or publicly debated. Having control over their website, *Escola Sem Partido*'s content curators and creators can exercise absolute power over the debates on their platforms, choosing to ignore alternative or contradictory perspectives. However, when politicians and society at large engage in debates about *Escola Sem Partido*-inspired legislative proposals, criticism of the veracity of its claims and the legitimacy of its demands emerge, and this weakens the movement's influence on governmental policy.

Through its texts, *Escola Sem Partido* actively tries to promote the fear of a very reductive identity for teachers: that of indoctrinators. The fact that the ideas of this movement are not part of an official or coherent program does not diminish their capacity to spread enough to have a profound influence on the cognitive frameworks many people use to conceptualize what it means to be a teacher. These attempts to create and regulate identities for teachers and students are not, of course, passively absorbed by these social actors. Resistance and imagination are tools used by teachers and students to think outside the frames *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse creates for them. In the following chapters, I analyze the narratives of two high school history teachers concerning how *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse impacts how they teach about controversial historical issues, and how they mobilize their understanding of history to position themselves in relation to it.

## Chapter 6

### **The participant-teachers' conceptualization of the impact and their resistance to *Escola***

#### ***Sem Partido's* discourse on how they teach controversial historical issues**

In this chapter, I report the results of my analysis of the participants' interviews and reflection journals concerning both their conceptualization of the impact of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse on the way they teach controversial historical issues, and how they articulate their resistance to it. As stated in the previous chapter, *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse works to constitute virtually any history teacher as a potential indoctrinator, given the intrinsically political nature of the subject.

In general, Camilo and Mauro, the participant-teachers, share the perception that *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse has negatively impacted history teachers, mainly due to the establishment of a climate of surveillance that has led many to self-censor. At the same time, they do not report a significant negative impact of this discourse on the way they teach controversial historical issues or sensitive topics in their own classrooms. They mostly take different approaches to how they deal with sensitive and controversial topics in the classroom, but they share a common understanding of the importance and the relevance of teaching them.

As stated in chapter 4, the teachers participated in two semi-structured interviews and they each wrote a reflection journal. The results were grouped into three major themes: the teachers' understanding of the movement's discourse and its impact on history teachers; the teachers' approach to teaching controversial topics; and the teachers' conceptualization of their resistance to the impact of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse. These themes are presented below.

#### **6.1 The teachers' conceptualization of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse**

Mauro and Camilo conceptualize *Escola Sem Partido* as a movement whose ideas about education are antagonistic to their own. For them, even though *Escola Sem Partido* markets itself as a neutral and apolitical movement against the alleged high degree of ideological indoctrination in schools, it has a clearly defined political stance linked to right-wing and conservative ideas and movements. Mauro, commenting on his impressions of the emergence of the movement, affirms that the disconnection between its rhetoric and his experience as a teacher caused him confusion. With time, he understood the political grounds for *Escola Sem Partido*'s claims, which clarified the intention of its discourse:

[W]hat came to me was a very angry discourse that “the teachers are doing something wrong, and we need to do something to avoid this.” ... And I didn't see it. So I was surprised, “wow, how come, what am I doing wrong? What do I need to change?” Later, ... I realized the other political relationships behind this. (Mauro, first interview).

Camilo argues that the movement's discussions are based on misleading premisses. For him, the movement is not worried about “indoctrination,” given that *Escola Sem Partido* has no objection to a teaching pedagogy based on the dominant ideology. Instead, in Camilo's view, the movement opposes teaching centred on diversity, equity, and critical pedagogy. As he says:

*Escola Sem Partido* was a discussion that indeed wanted [the school] to be doctrinaire, only that to the right, and avoiding some debates dear to life in a society in the sense of recognition, expansion of equality of life in society. (Camilo, first interview).

For Camilo, *Escola Sem Partido* defends a closed idea of education that does not acknowledge diversity and the role of education in one's personal development. Camilo perceives *Escola Sem Partido*'s view of education as contradictory to the ones that usually ground the practice of History teachers and teachers from other humanities subjects. In his view, this opposition would explain why *Escola Sem Partido* directs more of its accusations and criticism toward humanities teachers than other subject teachers.

In both teachers' perception, the movement's discourse paints an implausible and misleading portrait of education that negatively impacts the work of history teachers. In this sense, Camilo affirms that *Escola Sem Partido* has grown and become more influential through creating and spreading false polemics about education. In his view, this kind of false polemic drains the energy of educators, who could be discussing issues to improve education, but instead have to keep responding to the movement's groundless accusations. He claims:

This kind of indoctrination, the way they talk about it, does not exist. And it doesn't even exist a cohesion among teachers in general or among history teachers about the basic principle by which everyone is working so that students are taught in this way. (Camilo, first interview).

Mauro also contends that *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse is based on false premises that do not reflect the reality of a teacher's practice. Regarding the idea of a widespread [leftist] doctrinal effort perpetrated by history teachers, Mauro describes a sarcastic interaction he had with an *Escola Sem Partido* supporter:

I told him like this, 'well, if the teachers are indoctrinators, they are very bad ones. Because look at the results of these last elections that we had there ... We are not doing a good job indoctrinating these people ...' So, there's this sarcastic part, to make evident the absurdity of this idea. I even joked like this: I've worked in schools where I couldn't make the roll call because of the students' indiscipline, right? Imagine making these students have a certain political position if I couldn't even make the roll call. (Mauro, first interview)

## **6.2 The direct and perceived negative impacts of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse**

Camilo and Mauro understand that history teachers are privileged targets for the accusations of indoctrination from *Escola Sem Partido*'s supporters. Mauro emphasizes that most of the curricular components the movement considers controversial involve Brazil's recent history, which puts history teachers on the frontlines of *Escola Sem Partido*'s surveillance. According to both teachers' testimonies, the most significant impacts of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse on history teachers are the devaluation of their image in society — which has often impacted their

sense of self-worth — and the creation of a climate of surveillance and ideological policing — which most often results in self-censorship.

### *6.2.1 Devaluation of the history teachers' work: a change in society's perceptions*

Camilo and Mauro feel that the circulation of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse has negatively influenced how society conceptualizes history teachers' work. Camilo contends that the images that the movement have propagated on the internet have helped construct a collective perception that seeks to undermine teachers' role as educators. Mauro expresses feeling the community's devaluation of his contributions to society as an educator, and he links this change to his negative feelings of low self-esteem. Mauro clearly expresses his sadness about this situation in multiple instances of the data collection process:

This loss of support from society, I think is the worst thing that has happened in recent years, we no longer have the support of the people. ... [W]e had the support of the parents, we had the support of the surroundings, the community. And now it seems that we don't have [it anymore]. (Mauro, first interview)

It's tiring to talk at every family lunch and realize your family members still consider you a "leftist" or something. ... It's tiring to hear friends from your church talking about teachers as villains perverting innocent children. (Mauro, reflection journal)

Another effect of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse about the devaluation of teachers that Mauro points to is that some of his interlocutors dismiss his knowledge about his area of expertise as mere biased opinion. He feels that his expertise and years of study amount to nothing in such interactions. Along these lines, Mauro comments:

The fact that I studied, went to the university, went to grad school, studied more, doesn't make what I say more legitimate to these people. Sometimes I am talking to someone and the person says something very absurd. ... [Then] I say, "but where did you get this information?" "Oh, I saw it on this Facebook page, or in this YouTube channel that said this and that" and I say "Okay, but this is not true" I try to convince the person and the person says "Okay, but this is your opinion." So [I say] "no, I studied this, I am talking about something I really studied. I am not repeating the YouTube guy. I am talking about something that I understand. I am a teacher of this." But it is not valued. It is as if it had the same value, you know, ... it is only an opinion. (Mauro, first interview).

### 6.2.2 *Climate of surveillance*

For both Mauro and Camilo, one of the most significant impacts of the widespread diffusion of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse is the creation of a climate of surveillance, and a kind of ideological policing in their social circles. They claim that this is a perception shared by most teachers in relation to the attitudes of students, parents, and the community. Mauro and Camilo conceive of this climate as an external pressure that can result in history teachers imposing constraints on their own practice. In this regard, the teachers point to the practice of self-censorship, particularly regarding themes that might be considered sensitive or controversial from *Escola Sem Partido's* perspective. It is indeed clear in this analysis of the teachers' narratives, that the circulation of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse, and stories about teachers who were severely personally impacted by actions taken by the movement's supporters — such as persecution, surveillance, and various accusations — created an atmosphere of fear around their teaching, and impacted their decision-making regarding their practice.

Despite relaying a couple of concrete, negative experiences they link to the influence of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse, both teachers feel that they have suffered fewer impacts than their colleagues. Both Mauro and Camilo refer to cases of acquaintances and colleagues who have suffered persecution from *Escola Sem Partido's* supporters, and who have had their classes recorded, and faced administrative grievances and online shaming. However, the fear of backlash, in and of itself, even if it did not come to pass, was described as a negative impact many history teachers felt.

Throughout the interviews and in his journal, Camilo emphasizes that self-censorship is one of the more ingrained impacts of the widespread influence of the movement's discourse.

Teachers feel the pressure to deliver apolitical content, capitulating to *Escola Sem Partido*'s reactionary views so as not to suffer retaliation. Camilo comments:

[The] environment created by this kind of educational patrol, socially speaking, generated at various times the need to be careful when dealing with certain issues that were part of the school content, as well as demanded by the students themselves ... so I heard reports of self-censorship among teachers, episodes of anxiety and depression due to the environment and the state of affairs in Brazil during these periods. (Camilo, reflection journal)

Mauro has a similar perception of these situations. He conceptualizes the impact of *Escola Sem Partido* as more pervasive in the day-to-day experiences of teachers and in their interactions with students and parents. Reflecting on this situation, he says:

I believe that *Escola Sem Partido* had more impact on the ... day-to-day practice. I have witnessed colleagues who even responded to an administrative process because of a complaint from a parent or a student who recorded a moment in the class where they were saying something very specific, which, taking it out of the context of the class, it seemed that he was even wanting to defend a political position. ... So, I think that, in general, *Escola Sem Partido*'s biggest impact was this surveillance. (Mauro, first interview).

He argues that teachers are afraid that students will record and distort the content of what they are saying. In this sense, such a climate affects the teacher-student relationship as teachers feel afraid of their students. Still, Mauro also emphasizes the role of parents' and the community's hostile behaviour toward teachers in the perpetuation of the climate of surveillance.

### 6.2.3 Confrontation

Camilo and Mauro considered themselves "privileged" by not having endured more challenging situations when comparing their negative experiences with those of their colleagues. Nevertheless, both teachers could cite direct confrontational situations in their practice that they link to the influence of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse. All these situations were related to the discussion of topics seen as controversial or political.

Mauro directly felt the impacts of the atmosphere fomented by *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse. He affirms that he perceives more aggressive behaviour coming from students, and he discusses a specific situation in which one student seemed to behave precisely in a way intended to incite a polemical conflict in the classroom. He recalls: "There was a specific student ... his father had a strong political stance and I saw that he absorbed much of it and usually brought a lot to the classroom. It reached a point where it became very inconvenient, his intervention." According to Mauro, this kind of behaviour is an example of being put in a situation where he was required to share his position regarding controversial topics that were often unrelated to the topic at hand in class. In such cases, communicating his positioning could be framed as indoctrination by *Escola Sem Partido*. Mauro relates that he solved this situation by saying he was available to discuss highly polemical topics with the student during the break, and that he needed to prioritize class time to discuss other issues.

In initially describing this situation, Mauro did not acknowledge any changes in his practice due to the influence of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse. In his words: "In general, I will say quite honestly, my class hasn't changed." (Mauro, first interview). However, after some reflection, he asserts that he now is more careful in maintaining a "diplomatic" environment in the classroom when faced with polarizing political discussions: "[T]he only precautions I've taken is... to make the student more comfortable if he thinks differently from what I'm going to say" (Mauro, first interview).

On the other hand, Camilo shares two moments in his career when asked if the movement has personally impacted him. First, he describes a situation from 2016 where a student intimidated him, intending to limit his freedom of speech in connection to a union activity he had organized and participated in. Students were present at this event, but it was not a learning-related or



mandatory activity. Camilo says: “A student ... accused me of being an indoctrinator to the students and pointed a cellphone at me, filming what I was saying” (Camilo, reflection journal). The student also filed an administrative grievance, but Camilo received institutional support and was not penalized.

The second situation occurred in 2018, when he was teaching about the period of the Military Dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1985). This period is considered one of the more controversial themes in history teaching and is a common target of *Escola Sem Partido*'s rhetoric. As discussed in the literature review, there exist highly polarized and political debates about this period's significance in Brazilian society. There are significant conflicts between the memories of families and other actors and the discipline and field of historiography. As Camilo describes the situation, a substitute teacher claimed that Camilo was not qualified to teach about this content, in front of Camilo's students: “[the teacher] started to accuse me of lying about the period of the military dictatorship because I had not lived in that period and, therefore, I could not criticize the governments of that time.” (Camilo, reflection journal)

Once again, Camilo received institutional support and, this time, the support of his students who sent a complaint about the substitute teacher's breach of ethical behaviour to the administration. Camilo understands this situation as one inspired by the discourses propagated by *Escola Sem Partido*, mainly the distrust and delegitimization of teachers who talk about highly political topics. Thinking back on this situation, Camilo contends:

This type of situation, when they accuse you without knowing the work you developed, generates stress, sometimes even a feeling of insecurity. But the attitude taken by the class reinforced that the work I was developing had credit among the students and within the institution. (Camilo, reflection journal)

Camilo also affirms that he cannot say he has not been impacted by the atmosphere created by *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse in more hidden ways. The teacher believes that he might have

engaged in self-censorship, but he emphasizes at the same time that he always tried to avoid giving in to this:

I can't tell you that at some point it hasn't happened. Avoiding ... a topic; or, sometimes, dealing with a topic with a feeling of walking on eggshells ... But I have always avoided self-censorship because there are formative aspects of history that do not just concern the past, that are very important to be dealt with in history. (Camilo, first interview).

For Camilo, history teaching is often intrinsically linked to present issues, so self-censoring the content to become less controversial would be counter-productive for meaningful history learning. He affirms that debating political topics is an integral part of history teaching. He sees the discussion of dense, controversial, and difficult issues as topics that history teachers necessarily must deal with in the classroom.

### **6.3 Approaches to controversy in the classroom**

Camilo and Mauro share the same conceptualization of controversial historical topics, and they hold similar beliefs about the role history teaching can play for students in terms of how their understanding of the past can shape their understanding of the present, including important aspects of identity, and the extent to which they believe they can play a role in shaping their futures. It is not surprising then that Camilo and Mauro also agree on the importance of teaching controversial or sensitive issues. Where they differ is how they approach and tackle those issues in the history classroom. While Camilo openly welcomes controversy and uses the difficult feelings it can yield as a pedagogical tool, Mauro often takes a more 'diplomatic' approach to avoid such feelings from potentially taking over.

#### *6.3.1 Controversial topics are part of students' lives*

Both teachers realize that what makes a topic controversial varies according to the ever-shifting contemporary context. In this sense, students can be exposed to controversial topics both in the classroom, as well as in many other places and situations outside of school. It is in this

context that Camilo and Mauro distinguish some characteristics of what can constitute a controversial topic in the history curriculum: a) it happened recently, (contemporary relevance); b) students experience a strong, often emotional reaction to the topic as dealt with in the classroom if it conflicts with their family's version of topic, with the strong connections to identity such historical narratives provide; c) current discussions in society around the topic have become polarized; or, d) a combination of the above.

For Camilo, one's teaching approach can also play a strong role in terms of what makes a given history topic controversial. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that more recent historical topics might be considered more sensitive, such as the Military Dictatorship in Brazil. He also points out that the increase in political polarization in society, as well as the holding of strong religious beliefs and strong political identifications can render a topic polemical for some students. Overall, Camilo acknowledges that current trends and interest in a given issue influences what is considered controversial, or simply more interesting, to learn about in the classroom.

Mauro reports that in his classes, the more recent the period they are discussing, and the more related the discussion is to student's identities, the more controversy the discussion might spark: "Sometimes the most current themes... the impression I have is that, taking a chronological line, the controversy increases. It really reaches its peak in more recent history." (Mauro, second interview).

Mauro emphasizes that the controversial nature of some historical topics carries beyond the confines of the classroom and is experienced and enacted in multiple areas of students' lives, including interactions with family and with (social) media. He also points out that his classes about the ancient civilizations of the Fertile Crescent region usually do not spark controversy, whereas

lessons about the period of Brazil's Military Dictatorship certainly do. When asked to share his perception about why this happens, he contends:

I think what would differentiate one from the other is that the students will be on Facebook, and there won't be anyone discussing the Sumerians, saying "no... it's not true what these left-wing historians talk about the Sumerians; it's not true." ... Now, about the dictatorship, for sure. As I said just now, the relationship between the Egyptians and the Kushites will never be a topic for Sunday lunch. ... So maybe I think that the importance that the topic has for the student, the perception that it affects him in some way, can engage him to see and participate in controversies within his life. (Mauro, second interview).

Mauro emphasizes here the role social media plays in promoting controversies around certain historical periods. In his view, people who want to reinterpret an issue are often motivated by a polarizing political agenda, and the discussion of such matters is therefore most often grounded in political antagonism.

Camilo also argues that what makes a topic controversial in the classroom also makes it controversial in society. For him, students often reproduce in the classroom discourses they interact with at home, or in other contexts of their lives. Nevertheless, Camilo suggests that sometimes the classroom can be a safer place to discuss controversial topics, because it can provide a space in which students can be more open to considering and discussing contradictory perspectives.

Though Mauro and Camilo each employ various teaching methods, based on their teaching philosophy and view of history education, they generally take two contrasting approaches to tackling controversial content in history class. While Camilo embraces controversy as a methodological strategy for meaningful learning, Mauro most often takes an approach less focussed on the controversial nature of the content to avoid difficult feelings among students.

### *6.3.2 Controversy as a methodological strategy*

Camilo affirms that sometimes he purposefully selects controversial topics for his classes to motivate discussion and critical thinking. In the same vein, Camilo develops research on this

area in his learning institution. He sees the discussion of issues that could raise controversy in the classroom as teachable moments, where teachers can responsibly give the topic the attention it needs. Through such an approach, the role of controversy is not downplayed or avoided but, on the contrary, plays the “lead” in the classroom – the starting point of the learning process.

Camilo has developed educational strategies that move away from minimizing controversy to stimulate students’ reflection and active engagement in historical reasoning about different sensitive or highly charged topics. He doesn’t wait for controversy to arise spontaneously in class, but rather sometimes intentionally presents critical analyses of even “non-controversial” topics to help students construct and create meaningful connections to their own historical experiences, such as in the following case:

[F]or example, the First Brazilian Republic [1889-1930]. Students look at it from a certain distance and talk about controversial topics in politics, but they [the discussions] do not gain a degree of depth. In general, everyone condemns corruption and open vote. But if we were to go into more detail on the most recent politics, establishing relationships a little more in-depth, I think polemics could arise. But I, as a history teacher, will confess that I bring up some controversies in class. I don't sometimes wait for them to come. (Camilo, second interview).

### *6.3.3 Avoidance of difficult feelings*

Throughout the data analysis process, it is clear that for Mauro, taking responsibility for maintaining a general positive feeling in the classroom amongst students and towards him and the content being taught is of utmost importance. Mauro does not avoid taking up hard, sensitive, or controversial topics in the classroom, but he does point out that when he is about to raise a topic that might be perceived as controversial by students, he warns them that this topic might raise controversy, and that they might be confronted with views about the topic that conflict with their beliefs:

[A]t first I didn't do that, but [now] I'm always careful to say to the students—for example, talking about creationism and evolutionism, 'look, what I'll say here, if you don't agree,

that's not a problem. You don't need to feel offended if I say something that goes against what you believe. But I need to teach the scientific view because you will be asked about this view when you take some test.' So, this is a strategy that I always have more recently ... to anticipate a possible offence and ask that the student not feel offended. (Mauro, second interview).

Mauro seems to privilege this “avoidance of difficult feelings” approach to controversial topics, in contrast to using the controversy as the starting point for students to expand their understanding of history and its relevance. In privileging this approach, despite not avoiding topics that are perceived as a contradictory per se, Mauro attempts to shield his students from the controversy, and the problematic feelings they might experience in being confronted with a perspective on a topic that conflicts with their previous, and perhaps strongly held beliefs. In so doing, Mauro frames established, science-backed assertions as merely one “side” of a controversial topic, which students might choose to believe or not. Such an approach can inadvertently contribute to advancing *Escola Sem Partido*'s agenda, in that students might be led to understand that the theory of evolution, for example, is simply a matter of belief, one amongst other more or less legitimate competing belief systems; it is only the necessity to perform well on exams, where it is part of the mandatory content in the curriculum, that provides the rationale for learning it.

At the same time, Mauro describes multiple and nuanced approaches to addressing sensitive, contentious and controversial subjects in the classroom. In his reflection journal, he writes that critically evaluating controversial statements and sources is a crucial methodological strategy for promoting critical thinking in history classes. Additionally, in terms of resisting the spread of *Escola-Sem-Partido*-inspired simplifications, as well as their attacks on historical content, he emphasizes the importance of providing students with tools for evaluating both the validity and the intentions behind the sources they consult. Mauro illustrates this point in his description of a particular student, referred to here as “Pedro”:

I notice that students like Pedro ... often come to the classroom with memorized lines, almost always taken from digital influencers and stimulated by authority figures such as religious leaders, politicians, and parents. Pedro himself, when questioned, realized the fragility of what he was repeating. Perhaps this is a very important work that we need to insist on doing more and more: showing students the difference between facts and opinions and making them see the deeper intentions behind a video, text or even a meme. (Mauro, reflection journal).

#### **6.4 Conceptualizing resistance to *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse**

Camilo and Mauro conceptualize teachers' resistance to the impact of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse in different ways. Camilo largely understands *Escola Sem Partido* as a defeated movement, and he views the continued circulation of the movement's discourse as an attempt to re-assert its previous influence. Mauro perceives *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse as still very influential, and he articulates his resistance to it through micro and macro actions.

Camilo sees the legal declaration of the unconstitutionality of *Escola Sem Partido*'s propositions for education as the final battle won in the struggle against the movement's ideas. He considers the continued circulation of the movement's discourse in society as reflecting a nostalgic longing for a return to power, rather than evidence that its ideas are still influential. Additionally, when thinking about the entire history of the movement, Camilo highlights that even at the height of its influence, *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse was always contested by teachers. As evidence, he mentions the work that movements for democratic education have carried out to educate teachers about the pernicious nature and pervasiveness of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse, as well as the ways in which they have articulated and implemented various actions to resist and oppose it.

Regarding his practice, Camilo actively resists any attempts to restrict the critical and responsible discussion of issues that *Escola Sem Partido* considers to be inappropriate for the classroom: “[I] have always avoided self-censorship, because there are formative aspects of history

that do not just concern the past which are very important to be dealt with in history.” (Camilo, first interview). Camilo also continues to nurture hope in the resistance, and he is part of the fight against attempts to restrict critical thinking. He has not succumbed to the negative feelings generated by the effects of *Escola Sem Partido*’s discourse on teachers, and, further, he articulates the necessity of understanding the dire state of affairs incited by the movement, and the overall sociopolitical context in Brazil, as the very fuel that can and perhaps should motivate teachers to defend, and to improve education. As he concludes: “This, on the one hand, can be sad, but on the other hand, it needs to motivate people to defend and improve education more and more.” (Camilo, reflection journal).

Overall, Camilo considers *Escola Sem Partido*’s legal defeat as a significant advance in the resistance to its discourse. But he also points to other forms of resistance, namely providing both student and practicing teachers with solid knowledge about their role as educators through their teacher-training undergraduate courses and professional development. According to Camilo, this knowledge would provide teachers with both a framework and the necessary tools to confidently address controversial topics and situations in their classrooms. Additionally, Camilo believes that teachers should be politically active in fighting for a greater societal appreciation of teaching and teachers. He argues that teachers should combine their academic knowledge with social activism to understand the dynamics of history and knowledge, and to be active agents in improving society.

For Mauro, *Escola Sem Partido*’s discourse both continues to be widely circulated, and it continues to have a significant influence on society’s views of education, and history teachers. In his own practice, however, Mauro contends that his ability to carry out his role as a history educator, informed as it is by his understanding of the role history plays in education, was not



negatively impacted or limited by this discourse. On the contrary, he affirms that with all the attention on teachers and teaching its discourse has garnered, even if unfavourable, has served to reassure him of the relevance of teaching, and to underscore the importance of learning history critically. He also feels that teachers of other subjects he is in contact with understand the relevance of discussing history through a critical perspective, both to understand and to resist the negative impacts of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse as they manifest in the context of their teaching subjects. Overall, Mauro feels teachers and students are increasingly engaged in contesting *Escola Sem Partido's* educational narrative.

Mauro considers a part of the educational role of teachers as a work of resistance to *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse. He thinks of this in terms of routine and micro-resistance, the daily effort to conscientiously practice a less restrictive form of education than the one prescribed by *Escola Sem Partido*. At the same time, he highlights the importance of resisting at the macro level, such as thinking about and engaging in politics and educational policy.

In critically reflecting on the work of resistance and advocacy for change, Mauro argues that teachers should not fall into the trap of polarization. He warns teachers not to see students or parents as enemies or to give up on trying to establish bridges that can create a dialogue with those who are supporters of *Escola Sem Partido's* ideology. He argues that teachers' patience and efforts in maintaining this dialogue will pay off, and that it is the better strategy for trying to temper and even change the climate generated by *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse.

## **6.5 Discussion**

In this section, I discuss the broader implications of the findings of the in-depth analysis carried out in the case study involving Mauro and Camilo in the context of the broader literature on the impacts of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse.

Overall, Mauro and Camilo both acknowledged the significantly negative impact of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse on history teachers, due both to its defamatory representation of history teachers as indoctrinators, and to the propagation of a climate of surveillance – justified by this representation – that can lead to self-censorship. Notwithstanding this mutual acknowledgement, Mauro and Camilo do not report a significantly negative impact of such discourses on how they teach controversial historical issues. Nonetheless, through an analysis of their narratives, it is evident that *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse has both directly and indirectly affected their teaching approaches. Specific cases of students' or other teachers' attempting to interfere in their teaching, as well as accusations of indoctrination are considered to be direct effects. The prioritization of teaching practices that clearly oppose the limiting perspective of the movement to history education, or the adaptation of teaching practices to limit the potential of disturbing discussions taking place in class, are considered to be indirect effects. It is worth noting that a further effect of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse, as experienced in Mauro's case, was a decrease in his sense of self-worth as a history teacher.

Regarding resistance — which in the context of this research is defined both as the opposition to *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse, and to the proposition of alternative approaches to education — the two teachers adopt differing approaches. This would seem to be primarily due to their differing perceptions of the current strength and influence of the movement's discourse in society. What is noteworthy is that an analysis of both their cases suggests that the educational work of critical history teaching might be one of the fundamental means of resistance to *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourses.

*6.5.1 How the participant-teachers perceive the impact of Escola Sem Partido's discourse in their practice*

A careful analysis of their interviews and reflection journals suggests that *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse might have impacted Mauro and Camilo's practice in more ways than first acknowledged. In this section, I discuss the possible implications of the teachers' ways of narrating their experiences in terms of how they might contribute to the normalization of the impacts of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse on history teachers more broadly.

#### *6.5.1.1 The minimization of negative experiences*

One frequent point both teachers make throughout their interviews and reflection journals is that despite having a couple of negative experiences they ascribe to the influence of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse, these experiences are not as problematic as the ones some of their colleagues have endured. Neither of the teachers were personally targeted by a defamation campaign; nor did they have recordings of their classes shared on the internet. However, it is noticeable that both teachers tend to downplay their negative experiences and how the movement's discourse has impacted them personally.

Even though the teachers tend to minimize their negative experiences in recognition of the difference in magnitude between their negative experiences and those of their colleagues, such a minimization can ultimately work to normalize the less sensational effects of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse on history teachers. For example, Mauro says the following: "I consider myself 'privileged,' because I have never faced any particularly difficult situation in the sense of being watched over or penalized for expressing some opinion." (Mauro, reflection journal). Similarly, Camilo says, "If I was personally affected? I could say yes and give two examples. But I must highlight that these two examples are very localized and are experiences that can be considered minor in relation to the experiences of colleagues" (Camilo, first interview).

The emphasis on the “privilege”, or the minimization of negative experiences might be a defence mechanism to help teachers face these negative situations more positively. Nevertheless, this attitude helps to normalize the lesser impacts of *Escola Sem Partido*’s discourse that are not directly career-damaging, because, in its silence, it signals that only the most severe cases really matter, and therefore, are worthy of giving voice to. As a result, in comparison with worse cases, the less severe and routine effects become less publicized and, by extension, ‘more acceptable’.

Yet, despite downplaying the impacts of the discourse on their practice, the narratives of both teachers are full of instances in which the aggressive rhetoric promoted by *Escola Sem Partido* affected and mediated their interactions with students, friends, and colleagues. Both Mauro and Camilo’s narratives provide evidence that they perceived the impacts of the defamation of history teachers, and of the existence of a climate of surveillance that encourages self-censorship in some of their peers. Mauro mentions that he feels exhausted by the constant accusations of being a ‘leftist’ and ‘indoctrinator’ from family members solely because he is a history teacher. Camilo has been through two situations of confrontation and accusations that did not complicate his career only because he received support from the school administration and his students. These situations cannot be negated, as doing so acts to normalize these interactions as a ‘natural’ part of the challenges of being a teacher.

In this sense, the normalization of *Escola Sem Partido*’s aggressive portrait of teachers in Brazilian society might be one of the most pervasive impacts of its discourse, because it is used to legitimize the advancement of the movement’s agenda for education. As Camilo notes, and as discussed in chapter 5, *Escola Sem Partido* has used online platforms to mischaracterize the work of teachers, and to represent them as indoctrinators. In this respect, Camilo adds: “Through the cartoons posted [on the movement’s webpage], it is possible to perceive the dehumanization in the

representation of teachers, both in the images and in the way of referring to them.” (Camilo, reflection journal).

In considering *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse and its conception of education as 'neutral,' and therefore, according to its definition, de-politicizing, (for more, see introduction), it is noteworthy that the movement mobilizes an ultra-political discourse in its attempt to justify its goals. According to the sociologist Sabrina Fernandes (2017), ultra-politics is the use of a militarized discourse whose aim is to exacerbate polarization, and to create the identity of an enemy which is projected on one's opponents (Fernandes, 2017, p. 206). *Escola Sem Partido* constantly mobilizes ultra-politics when portraying any teacher as an indoctrinator, and therefore an enemy. Through the lens of such a discourse, students and parents are projected as being in opposition to teachers, who are vilified and discredited.

Given that language is not a neutral medium, but one that actually constructs versions of the social world (Wetherell & Potter, 1998), it is possible to argue that the widespread, defamatory discourse through which *Escola Sem Partido*'s represents teachers has impacted the way some students and parents interact with teachers. That is not to say that *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse dictates how all students, parents, and teachers interact. However, given that our understanding of texts is based on our existing linguistic, cultural, and social resources, and that, when engaging in discussions, we use terms “which are culturally, historically and ideologically available” (Billig, 2001, p. 217), it is plausible to argue that *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse about teachers informs the way in which many people think and speak about and interact with teachers. Mauro's experiences described in this chapter illustrate this change in perception with respect to society's regard for teachers. Mauro feels that, prior to the wide-spread emergence of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse, teachers had more support from society, whereas nowadays, he feels he no longer has

the same community support, in addition to not feeling well-regarded by a significant amount of people.

#### *6.5.1.2 Escola Sem Partido's impacts on the teaching of controversial issues*

According to the literature, real or perceived pressures from the community can result in constraints on teaching (Barton & Avery, 2016, p. 1018). Studies discuss cases in which history and social science teachers consider the fear of community backlash as one of the most significant constraints for meaningful engagement with contradictory issues in their classrooms (Hess, 2004; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Miller-Lane et al., 2006; Misco & Patterson, 2007;). Along the same lines, Misco and Patterson (2007) affirm that a lack of administrative support and communitarian encouragement for the teaching of controversy could result in teachers' disengagement from such issues, which could most likely happen in the form of self-censorship. In the case of history teachers in Brazil, it is reasonable to argue that the very perception of a climate of surveillance, brought about as a result of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse, has an impact on teachers, as even the perception of the possibility of persecution can lead to self-censorship.

The literature on *Escola Sem Partido* suggests that history teachers feel most vulnerable to being a target of reprisal for *Escola Sem Partido's* supporters when teaching about controversial historical topics (Caetano, 2021; Junior, 2022). This is confirmed by Mauro and Camilo's experiences. In their practice, the teachers present two different approaches to tackling controversy in their classrooms. It is possible to perceive some influence of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse in how Mauro and Camilo usually teach controversial topics. Still, it is not reasonable to argue that it has modified their teaching practices in significant ways. That is probably primarily because both Mauro and Camilo ground their teaching philosophy in their understanding of the relevance of critically teaching about historical issues that might raise controversy in the school or society.

Mauro and Camilo perceive a climate of censorship and acknowledge its damaging consequences for the meaningful teaching of history, as teachers might opt out of exercises that promote critical thinking and give in to *Escola Sem Partido*'s agenda of reducing the plurality of ideas in the classroom. Nevertheless, the two teachers have different degrees of awareness of the extent to which it has impacted their practice. Camilo affirms he has always tried to consciously avoid self-censorship but cannot affirm with certainty that he has never done so. On the other hand, Mauro emphatically affirmed more than once that he has never changed anything in his practice, except the acquired habit of warning students when a given topic might raise controversy, aiming to avoid 'difficult feelings' in the classroom. However, Mauro does not acknowledge that such an approach most likely also contributes to the advancement of some aspects of *Escola Sem Partido*'s agenda, as it frames scientifically well-established positions as one "side" of an argument that students might choose to believe or not. Mauro's practice seems to have been more impacted than he first admits. Even so, as is evident in his interviews and reflection journal, Mauro does assume some responsibility for taking up and discussing controversial topics in the classroom. Given the data available, it is not possible to precisely infer the degree to which worries induced by the perceived climate of censorship might in fact have impacted the teachers' practice. Overall, more research is needed to understand the ways in which teachers' self-preserving strategies, such as Mauro's avoidance of dealing with the difficult feelings that might arise in his students when taking up controversial topics, might contribute to advancing *Escola Sem Partido*'s agenda.

The teachers' data also suggests that *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse has not fundamentally shaken the foundation of the two teacher's teaching philosophies, as they were forged in a context prior to the movement. Both teachers share a constructivist perspective on learning about history, and both conceptualize history teaching by articulating and reflecting, directly or indirectly, the

influence of Rüsen's conceptualization of the orientational function of historical consciousness (Rüsen, 2004, 2006, 2017). As discussed throughout this thesis, this understanding of history teaching and learning is strikingly different that of *Escola Sem Partido*, which is based on the banking model of education (Freire, 2018), and the memorization of facts.

The Brazilian literature that focuses on best practices for teaching sensitive or controversial topics supports a perspective closer to Camilo's, in which controversy is brought to the center of the history lesson to promote meaningful learning (Nunes, 2021; Oliveira, 2020). Such an approach is also articulated as the very way to counter, oppose and resist *Escola Sem Partido's* influence on history teaching (Gil & Camargo, 2018). At the same time, scholars that have studied the experience of teachers observe that teachers might feel intimidated in adopting this approach on account of fear of community backlash, and that the chances that they do adopt it depend on the level of support of the school administration, and their degree of confidence in the subject; as a result, many teachers opt for an approach that minimizes controversy, (Dipardo & Fehn, 2000; Hess, 2004; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Misco & Patterson, 2007) – an approach that can be compared to Mauro's. Ironically, such a self-preservationist approach might contribute to the continuation of the conditions that led teachers to fear backlash in the first place. In Mauro's case, his attempts to avoid prompting students' difficult feelings might lead students to perceive the content of history in school as inherently ideological, meaning equally valid as other perspectives, regardless of evidence, and important and meaningful only in so far as it is mandatory, and enforced by the testing regime. In a simplified construction, this is precisely how *Escola Sem Partido* frames indoctrination in Brazil's education, and why the movement advocates for the surveillance of teachers and control of the curriculum.



Analyzing both approaches — centring controversy or avoiding difficult feelings — in the context in which the teachers work might provide some insights for understanding the different degrees to which controversy is welcomed into their classrooms. Camilo has extensive knowledge of the literature on teaching controversial issues and is in fact an active member of this community of practice, as he conducts research about it in his learning institution. He also has solid support from his administration, and he works in an institution with more funding and staff in relation to most public schools in his region. He has also designated out-of-class time to invest in his own research and to prepare for classes. This context cannot be overlooked when understanding Camilo's confidence in engaging with controversy in the classroom.

Mauro also believes in the importance of critically discussing controversial topics in history lessons. However, perhaps due to his working conditions or personal beliefs about the role of difficult feelings in the classroom, he opts for a different approach to welcoming controversy in his class. Even though Mauro did not provide an evaluation of the degree of support he receives from his school's administration in this study, it is a fact that Mauro's school does not provide the same working conditions as Camilo's, since Mauro needs to spend more time inside the classroom, resulting in less time to invest in preparing classes and getting oriented with the current literature on relevant topics. This context also cannot be overlooked when understanding Mauro's preference for avoidance of prompting difficult feelings when dealing with controversy in the classroom.

#### *6.5.2 How the participant-teachers conceptualize the resistance to Escola Sem Partido's discourse*

Mauro and Camilo approach resistance slightly differently, mainly due to their perception of the current strength and influence of the movement's discourse in society. Camilo mostly thinks of *Escola Sem Partido* as a defeated movement since Brazil's Federal Supreme Court has ruled

over the unconstitutionality of the movement's project pertaining to its educational policy (STF decide que lei inspirada no *Escola Sem Partido* é inconstitucional, 2020). In this sense, Camilo understands the continued circulation of the movement's discourse as a longing for its previous influence. Mauro, on the other hand, perceives *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse as still very influential, and articulates resistance to it through micro and macro actions.

Nonetheless, the teachers' data suggest that the educational work of critical history teaching is the main path for the resistance to *Escola Sem Partido*. Their data also suggests that it is important for teachers to be able to articulate the relevance of history education for students, in addition to being aware of the role it plays in one's basic orientation, in order to be able to deal with the challenges of teaching controversial issues. In the following sections, I first discuss Camilo's perspective on the legal defeat of the movement, and then I discuss what Camilo and Mauro's ideas about resistance can illuminate about opposing limiting discourses on history education, particularly concerning controversial topics.

#### *6.5.2.1 Camilo's perspective on resistance*

When questioned about resistance to *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse, Camilo emphasizes that the movement's attempts to become an official educational policy have failed, and that therefore all that was left for the resistance to accomplish was to make known the unconstitutionality of the movement's proposals. This is a compelling argument since the movement indeed has not achieved its major goal of its programme being institutionalized as educational policy. Nevertheless, the movement has not necessarily suffered any great limitations on its influence as a result of this defeat. As discussed in chapter 2, for years most studies conducted about *Escola Sem Partido* explained and discussed the unconstitutionality of the movement's precepts (Almeida & Caldas, 2017; Miguel, 2016). Yet, the unconstitutionality of its

agenda has not stopped the movement's growth nor the circulation of its discourse, which suggests that the circulation of damaging stereotypes about teachers and the imposition of taboos over certain topics might continue regardless of the movement's legal defeat. *Escola Sem Partido* continues to have supporters and an active presence online. Being legally defeated does not equal the end of its discourse's continued influence on society. Clearly, there is a need for more research to evaluate the long-lasting impacts of the campaigns of defamation directed at teachers on both the collective imagination and on various relevant interactions.

#### 6.5.2.2 *The participant-teachers' opposition to limiting discourses about history education*

Moving on to discussing the ways in which Camilo and Mauro's ideas about resistance can provide insights on how to act in opposition to limiting discourses in history education, I first argue that the teachers' testimonies reveal that, for them, teaching critically about history, and discussing its contents and methods responsibly, is a long-term act of resistance and opposition to *Escola-Sem-Partido*-inspired conception of education. For Mauro, the teachers' work involves routine and micro-resistance, a daily effort to be conscientious in the practice of a less restrictive form of education than the one *Escola Sem Partido* favours. Additionally, for both Mauro and Camilo, debating competing and potentially conflicting understandings of history is essential in understanding the dynamics and ideologies behind *Escola Sem Partido*, as well as its connections to other conservative and right-wing trending organisations and voices in Brazilian politics. Both also highlight that teaching about methods to evaluate sources and learning how to distinguish evidence from opinion is of extreme relevance in promoting critical thinking, which runs counter the basis of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse, which is largely built on groundless speculation.

The literature suggests that the fear of isolation, job instability and community backlash are powerful sources of concern that might lead teachers away from their engagement with

meaningful discussions of controversial topics (Dipardo & Fehn, 2000; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Misco & Patterson, 2007); however, the analysis of Mauro and Camilo's cases suggests that when support is expressed and received by the community and the school administration, teachers have more strength and confidence to face challenges when teaching controversial topics. In this respect, Camilo considers that a way to best prepare teachers for facing such challenges is through providing student-teachers and practicing teachers with opportunities to construct solid knowledge about their role as educators through their undergraduate or professional development courses. With such a solid foundation, teachers might have more confidence to remain true to their teaching philosophy even when faced with pressures to give in to more limiting perspectives of education.

Additionally, two important insights come from the teachers' perception of resistance: 1) the relevance of critical reflection about one's own practice, and 2) the necessity of participating with theoretical knowledge in those societal debates that concern teachers' work and education. Regarding critical self-reflection, Mauro argues that teachers should examine their interactions with parents and students to not fall into the trap of polarization set up by *Escola Sem Partido's* ultra-political discourse. Mauro sees more future in the patient strategy of creating bridges and a sense of community with parents and students instead of developing illusionary self-protecting trenches that distance teachers from the community. Camilo also seems to perceive the construction of bridges as a way of moving forward and resisting challenges to the teachers' practice. He argues that teachers should combine academic knowledge of history with social activism to have a solid understanding of theories of history and education and to be in touch with social issues, and, finally, to be active in speaking up and fighting for issues that concern them. In summary, for both Mauro and Camilo, teachers' resistance is conceptualized through the constant creation of connections.

## Chapter 7

### **The influence of the participant-teachers' epistemological understanding of history and education on their positioning regarding *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse**

In this chapter, I report on the results of my analysis of data collected with respect to how the participants' understanding of history and education influences their positioning in relation to *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse. As explained in chapter 4, I analyzed the data using Zanazanian's (2019) methodology — that is, I focused on examining the participants' history-as-interpretive-filter templates. As conceptualized by Zanazanian, “history-as-interpretive-filter templates resemble blueprint formulas that guide individuals' thinking about history's relevance for making life-orienting decisions” (2019, p. 851). Through this methodology, the interviews and written reflection pieces were the entry points into participants' templates for their orientation and their epistemic positioning in relation to history. To craft the participants' templates, I analyzed their narratives to uncover their schematic narrative templates. I read the narratives multiple times to ensure that I grasped the functions and values each participant attributed to history. In this endeavour, I examined the guided written reflection pieces — the reflection journals — in considering history as the protagonist to understand the actions and functionalities attributed to it in the journal narratives. Additionally, I analyzed the interviews in the same manner to nuance and deepen the results drawn from the reflection journals.

Overall, the results suggest that Camilo and Mauro use the *history-is-the-mediator-of-coexistence-in-society* template to frame their understanding of history. Their uses of such a template and their interpretations of the functions of history match their conscious conceptualizations of the workings of history and education, for the most part. Their conscious and unconscious understandings of history and education inform their attitudes towards history

teaching and their response to *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse. Nevertheless, Mauro's data indicates some incongruences in his enactment of the template, revealing contradictions within his conscious conceptualizations of the purpose of history and education. The emergence of these incongruences suggests that Mauro's attitudes toward history teaching are also significantly influenced by contextual circumstances and external pressures on his teaching philosophy.

Following Zanzanian's (2019) methodology, the templates were produced by comparing and grouping the functions the participants both attributed to history. The functions related to the creation of the *history-is-the-mediator-of-coexistence-in-society* template are: *history functions to understand the self and human diversity/to critically reflect and orient action*; and *history functions to understand the human experience in the world/to cultivate critical thinking and orient action*. This template points to a positive perspective of history for both life orientation and informed participation in society. The incongruences in Mauro's enactment of the template emerged in specific circumstances, where the teacher needed to navigate multiple and opposing pressures that conflicted with his template and conscious conceptualization of history and education, which I will further demonstrate in this chapter.

In the following pages, I present each participant's use of the cognitive template in its relationship with their conscious articulations of the relevance and purpose of history and education, followed by an analysis of the degree to which each teacher nuances their thinking when making knowledge claims. Due to the richness of the interviews in providing stories that worked as entry points to the participants' incognizant history-as-interpretive-filter templates, I selected different excerpts to help compose each participant's dataset for the creation of the templates, in addition to the guided written reflection piece. I distilled the narrative storyline and the functions attributed to history for each excerpt. To understand the degree to which each participant nuanced

their thinking, I analyzed the extracts of the interviews in which participants made knowledge claims, and classified them according to their degree of reflexivity, nuance, and their degree of objectivity/subjectivity.

In what follows, I present an overview of representative core storylines in each of the teachers' interviews and reflection journals to present the primary function they attribute to history. Next, I summarize their conscious articulations of history and education and their mode of transmission regarding their knowledge claims.

### **7.1 Camilo's use of the history-is-the-mediator-of-coexistence-in-society template**

Each of Camilo's two interviews and his reflection journal contributed to creating the *history-is-the-mediator-of-coexistence-in-society* template. The reflection journal was the centrepiece that informed the analysis, with the stories coming from the interviews playing a complementary role, in the sense of helping to bring nuance to the analysis.

In Camilo's reflection journal, the core storyline is that the study of history allows one to transcend their individualized understanding of the world, making it possible to grasp the plurality of the human experience in the past and to construct critical knowledge about it. For example, in his journal, Camilo celebrates the approval of educational legislation that made mandatory the teaching of Indigenous, African, and Afro-Brazilian culture and history in schools. He affirms: "These laws were the result of years of discussion about prejudice and racism in Brazilian culture ... and involved extensive debate in democratic periods." (Camilo, reflection journal). Additional examples pervade the text, in which Camilo's essential idea is that learning the past critically and through multiple perspectives can broaden one's view of how society or history works.

Camilo's first interview's core storyline is that engaging in debates about the past generates critical reflections about the present as it orients one's understanding of present events and,

consequently, one's attitudes toward the future, and the extent to which we can shape it. For example, when commenting on a history lesson he taught about the changes in schools during fascism in Italy before World War II, Camilo discussed how some students used this knowledge to evaluate a current event in Brazil critically:

[T]here was a photograph ... of Italian students dressed in black uniforms which resembled the Blackshirts of the *Fasci di combattimento* there in Italy. And the children were holding weapon simulacra ... at school ... And then the students themselves automatically related it to discourses of militarization that took place in the current political period [in Brazil]<sup>6</sup> and most students more recently in a critical tone. ... So, certainly, history brings elements for us to think about and understand this process today. (Camilo, first interview).

For Camilo, the act of learning history is not only related to the understanding of the past. It is also associated with one's understanding of current events through the correlation one makes between relatable situations or ways of understanding social phenomena.

Finally, the core storyline of Camilo's narrative in the second interview is that contact with historical investigations and history's multi-perspectivity broadens one's understanding of the past and allows one's understanding of why different people can hold distinct interpretations of and attitudes toward the same historical issue. The teacher described his experiences in proposing an inquiry-based unit about Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985). The initial activity asked students to ask their family members to share their memories of the period. After that, the students read a literary book on the theme. Camilo affirms he intended to use the potential contradictory views that the students gathered as a starting point for constructing critical learning about Brazil's military dictatorship:

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<sup>6</sup> Camilo is referring to a contentious educational program led by the federal government and some states' governments for the militarization of former regular public schools. Once militarized, the schools' administration is partially transferred to officers from the Military or Military Police Corporation. Such schools are controlled by both a civilian-run pedagogically-oriented administration, and a police-run disciplinary-oriented administration. For more information, see Grazinoli Garrido & Leal Filpo (2018), Alves & Ferreira (2020), and Reis et al. (2019).



They could see information in disparity. The book treated the dictatorship in one way, and the relative, perhaps, spoke in another way. This made it so that they could understand why people can have different views on the same event. [Then,] I proposed they solved this problem. In other words, they should do research to try to resolve those information disparities. And then I helped by guiding this research process.” (Camilo, second interview).

Overall, for Camilo, history always permeates one’s life and decision-making process. Furthermore, for him, by getting involved with historical inquiry, one can understand social dynamics, which in his conception, can transform one’s perceptions and attitudes toward current events. Thus, for Camilo, *history functions to understand the self and human diversity/to critically reflect and orient action*. In this sense, a vital characteristic of Camilo’s understanding of history’s workings is that history can promote the transcendence of individual-based thinking, and therefore facilitate an understanding of human diversity and the importance of coexistence in society. In this sense, the functions Camilo attributes to history are intrinsically interconnected, as it is possible to see in the following quote:

There are formative aspects of history that do not just concern the past, that are very important to be dealt with in history. I could think of issues involving sexuality ...—when we study Ancient History and discuss gender ... So, they have a formative aspect that even influences future expectations. How the student motivates himself to act from now on from the moment he encountered this discussion. (Camilo, first interview).

### *7.1.1 Camilo’s conceptualization of education*

Camilo’s conceptualization of education and its function is aligned with the ideas that ground his use of the *history-is-the-mediator-of-coexistence-in-society* template. For him, education processes are not straightforward: they are complex and permeated by mediation. To better explain, Camilo seems to understand education as a process of opening to diversity and human development, and not only as a way of acquiring the specific knowledge and skills of the subject. Education, for Camilo, is conceptualized as a tool for improving society – mainly to overcome prejudice, racism, and inequity.

In this context, the school is considered an environment of socialization and expansion of one's perspective about social reality and coexistence. That means that for Camilo, it would be possible to face and overcome prejudice and other inequities in life and society through education. Thus, for him, education has the function of transforming perceptions about the world, questioning one's assumptions and expanding one's perception of a particular phenomenon. In this way, for Camilo, the educational process does not take place through the adoption of arguments from authority figures but through dialogical, and autonomous learning.

### *7.1.2 Camilo's cognizant affirmations about the workings of history and education*

Camilo's cognizant ideas about the relevance and function of history for life-orienting purposes mostly match the incognizant ideas captured in his use of the *history-is-the-mediator-of-coexistence-in-society* template. Camilo mainly emphasizes that history contributes to students' development as human beings and members of society. That is because he affirms history's crucial role in helping one make sense of social dynamics and present-day phenomena. In this respect, the teacher affirms:

I could say that putting individuals ... that live in a society in contact with historical knowledge—and not only historical knowledge but scientific knowledge accumulated by humankind throughout time—works for one's development in a broader sense.” (Camilo, first interview).

Camilo also asserts that history profoundly and critically facilitates one's openness to difference and diversity. For him, history can expand one's personal development and self-knowledge in addition to being a rich source for acquiring knowledge about humankind. For Camilo, this process emphasizes history's life-orienting purposes, as one's historical thinking can orient one's actions toward the present, which in turn help to construct the future. In this sense, the teacher understands that people always combine the elements of their historical consciousness with the elements of the historical culture in which they are inserted. For Camilo, the synthesis of this

process can contain an orientational function that can inform actions taken for the positive transformation of social reality.

Overall, Camilo's vision of history's social function is intrinsically connected to his view of education's social function for students' development as human beings and members of society. An excerpt of his first interview exemplifies this connection. In it, Camilo discusses the ideas that ground his pedagogical philosophy – in this case the work of Paulo Freire:

From Paulo Freire's ideas, I could think that ... people's contact with historical learning often produces a sense of estrangement from what is familiar and perhaps familiarize what generates estrangement. So ... [it works by] reducing those divisions that exist in society and generating more processes of mutual recognition.” (Camilo, first interview).

Throughout his dataset, Camilo emphasizes the idea that education's purpose is to contribute to students' development as human beings. More profoundly, it is part of Camilo's perspective that through education, it is possible to transform problematic social realities — something that is particularly aligned to his history-as-interpretive-filter template.

### *7.1.3 Camilo's mode of transmission*

Camilo takes critical distance from his statements and recognizes the possibility of divergent interpretations for certain of his claims according to one's epistemological position. This characteristic is observed in the following excerpt, in which Camilo evaluates what he considers to be the main functions of educational processes:

These processes can even ... be criticized by discourses that are epistemologically more conservative ... An epistemological critique is something that can be debated from a scientific point of view ... This type of discussion, epistemological criticism, is even healthy. (Camilo, first interview).

Throughout the interviews and reflection journal, Camilo mostly grounds his statements in his theoretical conceptions and knowledge about history and education. At times, he also relates his anecdotal experiences as a history teacher. In this way, Camilo critically assesses his claims,

localizing his ideas and propositions in relation to both his theoretical standpoint and lived experience.

## **7.2 Mauro's use of the history-is-the-mediator-of-coexistence-in-society template**

Each of Mauro's two interviews and his reflection journal contributed to creating the *history-is-the-mediator-of-coexistence-in-society* template. As it was the case with Camilo's data, Mauro's reflection journal was the centrepiece that informed the analysis and the stories coming from the interviews complemented it, helping bring nuance. The core storyline of Mauro's reflection journal is that history provides evidence-based knowledge about the world and social phenomena, and that it provides tools that can help people read the world critically – thereby providing the means by which to move away from, or at the very least to question our common-sense assumptions. This idea is best exemplified in Mauro's evaluation of a situation in which a student of his shared some problematic ideas, (i.e., views historically unsupported by evidence), in class. In the procedures and methods of historical inquiry, Mauro found the tools to help the student discover the problems in his thinking:

I notice that students like Pedro<sup>7</sup> ... often come to the classroom with memorized lines, almost always taken from digital influencers and stimulated by authority figures. ... Pedro himself, when questioned, realized the fragility of what he was repeating. Perhaps this is a very important work that we need to insist on doing more and more: showing students the difference between facts and opinions and making them see the deeper intentions behind a video, text or even a meme." (Mauro, reflection journal).

For Mauro, engaging with historical inquiry and history learning generates a healthy suspicion of overly simplistic explanations of complex phenomena. Additionally, it opens space for a deeper investigation into commonly accepted so-called common sensical statements or beliefs, in that it can reveal the ideological grounds of a given idea or speech. In this sense, it is

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<sup>7</sup> Pedro is a pseudonym.

clear that Mauro understands that history works to give people the tools to develop their own critical thinking, to investigate and understand social phenomena in the past and the present.

The core storyline of the selected story in the first interview is that historical knowledge allows one to have a more accurate perception of society, although this is not considered true or valuable by everyone. This understanding is more evident in the following excerpt, in which Mauro describes some unpleasant interactions he has had with interlocutors who do not value history as much as he does:

Sometimes I am talking to someone, and the person says something very absurd. ... [Then] I say, “but where did you get this information?” “Oh, I saw it on this Facebook page, or in this YouTube channel that said this and that” and I say “Okay, but this is not true” I try to convince the person and the person says “Okay, but this is your opinion.” So [I say] “no, I studied this, I am talking about something I really studied. I am not repeating the YouTube guy. I am talking about something that I understand. I am a teacher of this.” But it is not valued. It is as if it had the same value, you know, ... it is only an opinion. (Mauro, first interview).

This excerpt demonstrates that for Mauro, history’s value lies in the fact of that it is grounded in knowledge, and that that historical knowledge allows for a more accurate understanding of both past and present social issues. In this extract and throughout the interview, Mauro understands, but also laments, that his interlocutor’s unwillingness to value his contributions to the conversations he has with them is rooted in their misunderstanding of history’s methods and its value in helping understand past and present social phenomena.

The core storyline of the selected story in the second interview is that it is only possible to know someone or something if their history is known. Mauro expresses this understanding when describing an exercise he frequently carries out in class to demonstrate the relevance of studying history for his students:

I tell them, “Think about the things that happened in your life. The remarkable things ... good and bad, that happened in your life. So ... you can think ... that you today are the

result of all that happened [to you]. So, you are only Gabriel<sup>8</sup> ... because you went through all those things. That made you who you are. And in a much greater sense than that, history is that: history is ... everything that exists and happens, is the result of processes of millennia, centuries, transformations, ruptures, struggles, defeats, victories, of everything that we have already passed through. (Mauro, second interview).

And further:

So, I always tell them: “a person cannot come to you today, look at you today and say something true about you without knowing what you've been through. They need to know.” So, I'll only be able to understand why something happens today... if I look back ... there is no way for me to have a minimum understanding of things without understanding history (Mauro, second interview).

Both in this excerpt and through an overall analysis of Mauro's narrative, it is clear that for him, *history functions to understand the human experience in the world/to cultivate critical thinking and orient action*. Mauro conceives history not only as a relevant academic discipline but also as a way to get to know oneself and the world around you. For Mauro, history is always playing an active part in how people interact with each other. In this, Mauro emphasizes history's crucial role in developing and bolstering one's ability to think critically about present-day events, which in turn can help to orient one's understandings and actions.

### *7.2.3 Mauro's conceptualization of education*

Mauro conceptualizes education as a humanized learning process that fosters and nurtures students' development into their full humanity. Mauro values the approach of making the educational process a pleasant experience that can generate friendly relations between the teacher and students. Overall, education for Mauro is conceptualized as something positive – related to hope, patience, persistence, and the positive transformation of society. Even so, he acknowledges that some processes within the school can be focused more on neoliberal metrics than the

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<sup>8</sup> Gabriel is a pseudonym.

humanized learning process. However, he conceives these circumstances as exogenous to education's own characteristics.

Another notable feature of Mauro's conceptualization of education is that he acknowledges the complexity of one's relationship to knowledge: he recognizes that knowledge is multifaceted. Still, Mauro emphasizes the value and authority of experts and scientific knowledge, which can be observed in the following excerpt:

[R]ecently I talked to a group of students and said 'look, there are several forms of knowledge. And I don't want to say one is or is not more valid than the other. There is religious knowledge, there is common sense, there are many types of knowledge. But at school, we talk about scientific knowledge. And scientific knowledge needs a method, needs to follow certain parameters, needs to be accepted later by a group of people who are in the field' ... so I try to show this, this research methodology and how it validates knowledge. (Mauro, second interview).

#### *7.2.4 Mauro's cognizant affirmations about the workings of history and education*

Mauro's conscious ideas about the relevance and function of history for life-orienting purposes mostly match the incognizant ideas captured in his use of the *history-is-the-mediator-of-coexistence-in-society* template. However, particularly with respect to the topic of teaching controversial historical issues, Mauro's history-as-interpretative-filter does not match some of his pedagogical decisions. Interestingly, this contradiction emerges during specific circumstances in which Mauro needs to navigate multiple and opposing pressures that conflict with his template and conscious conceptualization of history and education. In the next paragraphs, I first describe the situations in which there is coherence between the teacher's ideas, and then I describe the moments in which it becomes evident that certain discrepancies arise between his ideas and the actions he carries out.

Throughout the dataset, Mauro emphasizes that history encourages a critical and in-depth understanding of present-day social dynamics. He highlights the relevance of history in combatting

the false perceptions of ahistorical explanations for the human experience in the world. For Mauro, history performs the function of helping us to understand who we are and how we got here so that we can better understand where we want to go. This has a life-orienting effect for him:

So, I think history has this function ... of bringing this issue of our lives over time, over a long duration, and that is a tool for acting in the present. [A tool] to reflect on the present, talk about the present, act in this present, and project others—I always say this to my students: “we study the past, but we cannot change; we can only act in the present. ... We will see it in the future.” (Mauro, first interview).

In examining Mauro’s affirmations about history, it is evident that the teacher consciously acknowledges the influence of one’s historical knowledge and ways of thinking historically in framing and informing one’s attitudes and perceptions about present-day events. For the teacher, this framing function of history can lead to a positive transformation of social reality.

Mauro consciously relates his understanding of education to his students’ development as human beings. He articulates this idea in the first interview:

I believe that the purpose of education is to develop a human being with what we as a society believe is ... the best possible version of a human being. And the school, within this vision of education, would be the space where this should occur in a facilitated way. Because the human being, I believe they will be built with infinite contributions. But the school ... was thought to be the ideal place for this. (Mauro, first interview).

The centrality of school in shaping and guiding students’ development comes in two ways for Mauro. First, he emphasizes formal education’s role in facilitating the construction of students’ critical thinking skills. Secondly, he underlines that formal educational spaces, such as the school, play a fundamental role in students’ socialization. In this respect, Mauro highlights the importance of building friendships and trust between teachers and students and among students. Overall, Mauro relates the work of a teacher to the exercise of patience, persistence, and the will to build long-lasting relationships with students.



Contrastingly, the application of these ideas in influencing Mauro's pedagogical approach in his daily teaching diminishes when he addresses controversial historical issues in class. This is most noticeable in Mauro's first and second interviews, in which he describes his approach to teaching controversial issues — an approach he characterizes as “avoidance of difficult feelings” as pointed out in the previous chapter. The role historical knowledge plays when dealing with controversy contrasts significantly with the role attributed to it in his template.

Based on this teaching approach, whenever a given concept or topic in history classes might conflict with students' personal beliefs, the teacher advises students to compartmentalize so-called “school” historical knowledge from their “personal” historical opinions. He justifies the learning of the former by appealing to the necessity of performing well in formal exams. From this perspective, Mauro pauses his engagement with the idea that history is valuable because it promotes the understanding of the human experience in the world, cultivates critical thinking and orients action, and instead attributes to history the mechanical function of providing scientific knowledge about the past to perform well on exams. This idea can be seen in the following excerpt of Mauro's first interview:

Some time ago, we had a class about evolution ... And in our material, we work with the evolutionary perspective. ... So, before the class, I said, “this is the perspective that we are going to work with here. If you don't agree, if you have another vision, no problem, but you need to learn this one, so that if one day you are going to take an entrance exam, an ENEM<sup>9</sup>, you will be asked about this concept. (Mauro, first interview)

In this excerpt, it is clear that history and historical knowledge are conceived as detachable from students' personal lives; from this perspective, history is important to learn mainly because students want to perform well in formal exams. Still, such an acute contradiction between Mauro's

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<sup>9</sup> ENEM is an entrance exam for universities in Brazil.

template and its enactment was only present and identified when the teacher needed to navigate the multiple pressures related to the teaching of controversial historical issues.

#### *7.2.5 Mauro's mode of transmission*

Overall, when compared to Camilo, Mauro's knowledge claims are more general and less self-reflective. For example, Mauro categorically affirms that he never engaged in any form of self-censorship due to the influence of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse. Camilo presents a more nuanced self-reflection when discussing this issue, and he reports that he cannot say for sure that he has never inadvertently engaged in self-censorship. An example of Mauro's more general claims is when he essentializes the work of historians versus the work of youtubers. He talks from a point of view that characterizes all historians as responsible writers, trustworthy in their analysis of sources, while all youtubers are characterized by irresponsibly propagating misguided opinions dressed up as historical facts. Although generally the credit he gives to historians' analysis is well grounded in the rigour of their methodology, Mauro's generalization of youtubers overlooks the opportunities that YouTube provides as a digital space for the dissemination of historical knowledge. One example is the major effort of Brazilian academics to develop projects that publicize historical knowledge on the internet through YouTube, for example (see *Associação Nacional de História - Anpuh Brasil - YouTube, 2022; Leitura Obrigatória HISTÓRIA - YouTube, 2022*).

Leaving comparisons aside, Mauro presents a developing critical posture, characterized by intermittent awareness of generalizations. For instance, he acknowledges the possibility of a multiplicity of interpretations for a given historical phenomenon with respect to theoretical, political, and identity-related perspectives. In the second interview, Mauro speaks about the different currents of historical thought he was exposed to at university, and how this exposure

opened his perception of what history could be. Additionally, Mauro believes one can change and develop ones' ideas and conceptions about the world, a conception that is clearly in opposition to a non-reflective or closed mindset. Furthermore, Mauro uses his personal experience and beliefs as the primary source to evaluate and make claims about the questions he was asked. In such cases, however, the teacher largely acknowledges the limitation of this approach, and he indicates an openness to contradictory views.

### **7.3 Discussion**

In this section, I discuss the implications of the findings reported on above with respect to how Mauro and Camilo's epistemological understanding of history and education influence their positioning in regard to the impact of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse. One main conclusion drawn from the results is that both teachers use the *history-is-the mediator-of-coexistence-in-society* template, but they enact it differently. When Mauro is faced with challenges, his enactment of his template is less coherent in relation to its underlining ideas. Still, an analysis of the results led me to another main conclusion: I argue that the *history-is-the-mediator-of-coexistence-in-society* template represents an oppositional understanding of the workings and functions of history to the ones expressed by *Escola Sem Partido*. This epistemological incompatibility between the teachers and the movement mediates the teachers' positionality regarding the impact of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse.

In the following pages, I develop my arguments that led to these two conclusions. I first state the common ground between the teachers' understandings. Next, I discuss the differences between their enactments of their templates. Finally, I present some concluding thoughts about the discussion.

### 7.3.1 Common ground between the teachers

The teachers' common template, *history-is-the mediator-of-coexistence-in-society*, was created from their main conceptualization of history's functions. The emergence of this template suggests that Mauro and Camilo share some fundamental understandings of history. First, both understand that history is an account of the past formulated through the interpretation of evidence from the past. Second, they understand that historical accounts are invariably selective. That is, history is not the past *per se*, but the telling of the past based on certain narratives, sources, and theories that informs the historian's interpretation of past events. This means that both teachers understand that historical accounts and the teaching of them are never neutral. They both understand that such accounts do not represent the objective past, but rather an interpretation of it, and that interpretations can be more or less supported by evidence. This understanding is the fundamental difference between the teachers' epistemological position regarding history and the position taken up by *Escola Sem Partido*. As seen in chapter 5, *Escola Sem Partido* promulgates the idea that history teaching should convey the "truth" about the past in a neutral way — which in practice means teaching traditionally accepted narratives about past events, and in ways that are not open to diversity, or alternative perspectives. But both Camilo and Mauro share the perception that the act of learning history is not only related to an understanding of the past. For them, learning history also has a life-orienting dimension. That is, they believe that people use their understanding of the past to make meaning of and in the present, which in turn is linked to their understanding of current events. What is clear is that for both of them, history can help inform the actions we choose to take in the present, and it can help frame our choices about the future.

The *history-is-the-mediator-of-coexistence-in-society* template underlines the two teachers' conception that history works to mediate the interaction of diverse groups in the same

society. In this respect, Camilo emphasizes history's role in encouraging openness to diversity, multi-perspectivity, and critical analysis of controversy as a way of helping students develop as human beings. Similarly, Mauro talks about promoting tools and skills for students for reading the world critically, in addition to its role in contributing to students' overall development as human beings. Therefore, the teachers conceive history as functioning to give meaning to the past, and to orient one's understanding of temporality.

Additionally, Mauro and Camilo understand that students' perceptions about the past are formed in more places than just the school. They acknowledge that when students come to class, they are already making meaning from the past; they have already developed certain frameworks through which to understand the past, and to orient their perceptions of the present and future. These frameworks are composed of multiple inputs: family memory, traditional national narratives, identity-group narratives, and what is considered to be common sense. In other words, they acknowledge that students already think historically in their meaning-making which is based on their culture and their particular context, which in turn shape their "sense of temporality and collective memory" (Clark & Peck, 2019, p. 2). At the same time, Mauro and Camilo both view their role as history teachers is to present another way of making sense of the past: a self-reflective way that promotes critical thinking and openness to difference.

### *7.3.2 Differences between the teachers*

Despite sharing the same fundamental conceptualizations about the workings of history, Mauro and Camilo each enact their shared history-as-interpretive-filter differently. Camilo presents more coherence between his incognizant and cognizant ideas about history, and his conceptualization of the role of education and the way he presents these ideas. First, the functions Camilo attributed to history via the history-is-the-mediator-of-coexistence-in-society template are

intrinsically interconnected. In his articulation, understanding the self and human diversity are mutually connected to the promotion of critical reflection, and both are correlated to action-orientation.

Second, Camilo's intentional definitions of the relevance of history and education are also strongly aligned with the incognizant ways of intellectualizing history presented above. This teacher understands education as a process of opening to diversity and human development, which can have the function of transforming perceptions about the world by expanding perceptions of specific phenomena. Such ideas are inextricably tied to the relevance Camilo attributes to the role of history and history teaching. Camilo emphasizes the crucial role history can play in helping one make sense of social and temporal dynamics, which can in turn contribute to students' development as human beings and members of society. It is clear, then, that Camilo attributes similar social roles to education and history.

Finally, Camilo transmits these ideas and makes claims about his perspective in a self-reflective way. He expresses openness to the possibility of divergent interpretations according to one's epistemological position; he acknowledges the complexity of the phenomena he talks about; and displays the ability to be self-reflective. These characteristics demonstrate once again the coherence between Camilo's incognizant and cognizant ideas about history and the role of education.

Overall, when compared to Camilo, Mauro presents less coherence between his template, his consciously expressed ideas of history and education and the way they are transmitted. The point of incongruence emerges in his approach to teaching controversial issues. In these situations, Mauro limits history's value to allowing students to perform well in formal exams, instead of reaffirming its relevance for life-orientation and critical thinking, as these are the values he usually

attributes to history through the template. Remarkably, this incongruence emerged when Mauro needed to navigate challenging situations in class. The challenges involved teaching controversial topics in the context of a quiet but ever-present climate of censorship, and in the context of trying to avoid triggering students' difficult feelings in class discussions about such topics.

Mauro's lack of awareness of the incongruence of this approach with his main conceptualizations of history suggests that the challenges he faces in such situations are overwhelming. In fact, he describes a lack of time due to having to carry out considerable administrative responsibilities related to the neoliberal politics of accountability in the school in which he teaches. These factors might contribute to the teacher's lack of self-awareness in respect to the discrepancy between the ideas expressed in this approach to teaching controversial issues, and his central ideas about history and education.

Still, in an overall sense, the functions Mauro attributes to history through his history-as-interpretive-filter are aligned with his conscious articulations of the social role of history and education. In the narratives that constitute this template, Mauro linked historical inquiry to 1) the construction of knowledge about the past; 2) the generation of healthy suspicion of simplistic explanations of complex phenomena; 3) a deeper investigation of common sense, and 4) life orientation. These ideas match his conscious articulations of the social relevance of history teaching. For this teacher, history is a form of getting to know oneself and the world, and it is an active and living part of how people interact with society, and among themselves.

For Mauro, the connections between history and education's social roles align in their function of fostering students' intellectual and personal development as human beings. In this, the idea of developing critical thinking is the key for Mauro, but he also emphasizes the school's role in nurturing students' socialization. As the results indicate, Mauro conceptualizes education and

his role as a history teacher as something positive, related to hope, patience, persistence, and a possible positive transformation of society. These conceptualizations are strongly linked to his idea that history informs one's actions that can lead to the positive transformation of social reality.

In the interviews, Mauro transmitted his thoughts in a more generalized and less self-reflective way than Camilo. That being said, Mauro's statements do not denote an objectivist perspective. The teacher presents a constructivist view of education and acknowledges the possibility of multiple interpretations of a given historical phenomenon regarding multiple theoretical, political, and identity-related standpoints.

Similar to the cases of three members of English-speaking Quebec discussed by Zanazanian (2019) in his article on history-as-interpretive-filter's methodology, Mauro and Camilo share a template but enact it differently. In his study, Zanazanian articulates that the participants' commitment to the English-speaking Quebec community "is central to how they operationalise their sense-making" (p. 864), but their individual differences resulted in different enactments of the same template. In my view, Mauro and Camilo's case is comparable, as both teachers share much of the same understanding of history's workings, and they share a similar perception of *Escola Sem Partido* and the impacts of its discourse. However, the teachers have different personal and work-related characteristics and have gone through different experiences that might influence their distinct approaches to the template.

As noted above, Camilo describes his working environment as good and stable. He teaches in a school that gives him less time in class and more time to prepare, study, and carry out research compared to most public schools in Brazil. As described in his narratives, Camilo has extensive support from the school's administration, and he enjoys overall freedom to develop innovative projects in class. Additionally, Camilo has a Ph.D. in history education. He is a history teacher and



a researcher in this field. Therefore, he is active in the history teachers' community of practice (Sears, 2014). He understands himself not as a passive receptor of history or history education theory but as an active maker of it. This background seems to be related to his self-reflective stance. Camilo has a strong theoretical foundation, time, and administrative support to nurture this position.

On the other hand, Mauro's challenges at work, particularly the amount of time the administration has dictated he must spend in the classroom, which leaves him less time for research and reflection, might be related to his lack of awareness of the incongruence between the ideas he expresses and his actual approach to teaching controversial issues. His conscious articulations about the function of history and history teaching stands in opposition to his actual approach to controversial issues, as this approach offers a less critical and more transactional view of history's functions for his students. It should be noted again that this approach has emerged in situations where Mauro needs to navigate multiple challenging situations at once. This corroborates the idea that the context influences the way people interact with the questions they are posed and inclines them to "use their tool-kits differently" (Zanazanian, 2019, p. 864).

### *7.3.3 Connections between the teachers' understanding of history and education and their positioning regarding Escola Sem Partido*

In this section, I discuss the relationships between the teachers' understanding of history and education and their positioning regarding *Escola Sem Partido*. From the analysis of the teachers' use of the *history-is-the mediator-of-coexistence-in-society* template, I argue that teachers' positioning stands in opposition to the ideas on history and education associated with *Escola Sem Partido*. This epistemological incompatibility mediates the teachers' understanding of and resistance to the impact of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse.

As stated in the previous section, for Camilo, there is a strong coherence between his understanding of history, his role as an educator, and his teaching practices. Camilo recognizes the intrinsically political nature of history teaching, and he recognizes that following a so-called neutral approach to history teaching works, in actuality, to maintain problematic structures. Which is exactly what *Escola Sem Partido* is promoting when it favours an objectivist, traditionalist view of history, and when it campaigns for so-called neutrality in education, which has the effect of banishing from the classroom any approaches or topics that oppose the movement's ideology. Camilo clearly articulates an understanding of the problematic nature of *Escola Sem Partido's* veiled political project of educational neutrality, and this understanding is reflected in his practice. He makes conscious efforts not to give in to the movements' strategies for limiting debate on controversial issues in the classroom.

Conversely, in Mauro's case, there are some incongruences between his understanding of history, his role as an educator, and his teaching practices. However, like Camilo, Mauro clearly articulates his understanding of history and education in opposition to *Escola Sem Partido's*. This perception mediates the teacher's reading of the movement, including the sociopolitical context of its emergence.

Still, in Mauro's actual approach to controversial issues, he unintentionally reduces the value of history to a transaction in his students' lives, meaningful because they will be tested on its content in compulsory exams that must be taken if they want to succeed. This stands in contrast to Mauro's educational aims and his view of history. Given Mauro's narrative, I contend that the emergence of this approach can be understood as an undesirable effect of the pressure of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse, in addition to the many challenges Mauro faces as a teacher in a Brazilian public school, (i.e., the neoliberal politics of accountability, lack of time to dedicate to preparation

and research, and being overloaded with responsibilities). However, these incongruencies are marginal to Mauro's conceptualization of history. On the whole, his ideas and attitudes tend to match the conceptualization of history related to his template. It is based on these ideas that he articulates the incompatibility of his teaching philosophy with *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse.

The crucial difference between *Escola Sem Partido's* understanding of education and so-called neutrality, and the teachers' position is that Mauro and Camilo have a nuanced understanding of how history mediates people's lives. Research has shown that engaging with history can have a significant impact on young people's ideas about their identities and decision-making (Kisler, 2020; Zanzanian, 2012). *Escola Sem Partido* seems to recognize this, but purposefully equates it with indoctrination, all the while advocating for "neutral" teaching – which in practice, means silencing teaching practices that oppose the movement's ideology, as seen in chapter 5. Based on the extent to which it is grounded in the literature about historical consciousness and history education, the movement's perspective is flawed. Furthermore, such one-dimensional historical representations also have implications for students' historical thinking by perpetuating specific discourses that reaffirm existing power relations (Kisler, 2020). In contrast, the two teachers acknowledge the intrinsically political nature of teaching history, and they both accept responsibility for facing this challenge in an ethical way. Precisely because they understand the dynamics of history teaching and historical consciousness, for both Mauro and Camilo positioning oneself as both critical and conscientious is integral to their role as history teachers.

Overall, the analysis of Mauro and Camilo's history-as-interpretive-filter provides great insight into the teachers' sense-making and its influence on their positioning regarding *Escola Sem Partido*. Although the discussions specific to Mauro and Camilo's experiences cannot be

generalized, their ‘two-case’ case study can offer valuable insights for helping teachers navigate challenging contexts.

Two such insights stand out as recommendations for supporting history teachers in such contexts. The first is that teachers benefit from a solid epistemological understanding of history. Mauro and Camilo’s narratives suggest that this understanding helps teachers remain true to their teaching philosophy when faced with adverse challenges. This idea is supported by educational researchers in the field, who highlight the importance of history teachers being able to reflect upon epistemic issues, as this is fundamentally related to their ability to teach according to the historical thinking model (Elmersjö & Zanazanian, 2022).

The second insight is that teachers need continuous support from school administrations as well as sufficient time for self-reflection and to explore innovative approaches in their teaching practices, particularly with respect to teaching controversial historical issues. Such a recommendation is supported in many articles related to the teaching of controversial topics in history and social studies (Misco & Patterson, 2007; Washington & Humphries, 2011). The analysis of the cases of Mauro and Camilo provide a rationale for the importance of time for reflection in terms of establishing coherence between one’s conceptualization of history teaching and one’s practice. The awareness of possible incongruences, that can only come about as the result of having time for self-reflection, is particularly relevant for teachers working in contexts where censorship is both a constant threat and is, in any case and any form, incompatible with their teaching philosophies. Extended support from school administrations, as well as time for study and self-reflection can allow teachers to both deepen their theoretical understanding and to re-evaluate their practices in their efforts to strengthen the degree of coherence between the two.

## Chapter 8

### Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to provide explanations for how two history teachers in Brazil perceive the impact of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse on how they teach controversial historical issues, how they resist the said discourse, and how they mobilize their understanding of history and education to do so. To accomplish this task, I conducted a two-part qualitative study. In the first part, I analyzed a set of foundational texts from *Escola Sem Partido* to provide a detailed analysis of the movement's discourse regarding history teachers and history education. The second part built on the knowledge constructed through this analysis, and it expanded the research scope to analyze the experiences of the two history teachers.

As seen in the initial chapters, the literature reports that history teachers are particularly impacted by *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse. That is because much of the history curriculum is often interpreted by the movement's supporters as "doctrinal"; this is due to its political character and its engagement with controversial issues (Carvalho Silva, 2020; Moura, 2016). The literature reports that, in general, teachers often fear being seen as indoctrinators or becoming targets of community backlash when discussing controversial issues (Washington & Humphries, 2011; Hess, 2004). Researchers that have focused on the study of contemporary challenges to history teaching in Brazil attest that *Escola Sem Partido* can work as a force that negatively influences history teachers' practices, often leading teachers to self-censor due to fear of community reprisal against their pedagogy (Alves Maia Junior, 2022; Caetano, 2021).

In the first part of this study, I analyzed the discourse of documents that express *Escola Sem Partido*'s views of teachers, education, and indoctrination in general, as well as their specific views of history and history teachers. I reported this analysis in chapter 5, where I argue that *Escola*

*Sem Partido*'s texts portray the movement as a "neutral" entity that advocates against the so-called problem of political (left-wing) indoctrination in Brazilian education. Regarding teachers, and specifically history teachers, I developed the argument that the movement's texts work to constitute virtually any and every teacher as a willful indoctrinator. Using dichotomous rhetoric, the movement constitutes history teachers as enemies, and therefore any topic that contrasts with the movement's conservative and right-wing values is rejected as controversial and reprehensible and therefore inappropriate in the history classroom.

Chapter 5 concluded with the argument that *Escola Sem Partido*'s texts seem to have been able to normalize, at least among the movement's supporters, the ideas that (leftist) indoctrination is widespread in learning institutions in Brazil, and that humanities and social science teachers are the most likely to practice indoctrination. Given that the movement exercises control over its website and social media, its content creators can censor or ignore contradictory perspectives. In this way, the movement is able to promote and reinforce a particular and reductive identity of teachers as indoctrinators; such a conception can, in many cases, become unconsciously part of the mental frames people use to conceptualize what it means to be a [history] teacher. Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrated, however, that these prescribed identities are not passively accepted by teachers, and that these social actors resist efforts to limit their practices in various ways.

Chapters 6 and 7 reported the second part of this study, in which I investigated the experiences of two history teachers in relation to *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse. Chapter 6 reported my analysis and discussion of the testimonies of Mauro and Camilo, the two research participants, concerning this study's first research question: How do two Brazilian history teachers conceptualize and resist the impact of *Escola Sem Partido*'s discourse on how they teach

controversial historical issues? Chapter 7 was concerned with the second research question: How do the teachers' understanding of history and education influence their positioning?

In chapter 6, I first developed the argument that Mauro and Camilo acknowledge *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse's negative impact on history teachers in general, but do not perceive a significant negative impact of the discourse on how they teach controversial historical issues. In this chapter, I demonstrated how *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse has both directly and indirectly affected Mauro and Camilo's teaching approaches in more ways than they acknowledge. As I argued, both teachers tend to downplay their negative experiences in recognition of the difference of magnitude between their negative experiences and those of their colleagues. I contended, however, that this practice can ultimately work to normalize the less prominent effects of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse on history teachers.

Regarding the movement's impact on how Mauro and Camilo teach controversial historical issues, I argued that the teachers' testimonies confirm the general perception found in the literature: history teachers feel most vulnerable to become a target of reprisal from *Escola Sem Partido's* supporters when teaching about controversial historical topics (Caetano, 2021; Junior, 2022). I also identified and reported that Mauro and Camilo welcome controversy in their classroom to different degrees. Camilo tends to use the approach described as "controversy as a methodological strategy," while Mauro's approach was named "avoidance of difficult feelings." My understanding was that although it is possible to perceive some influence of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse in how the teachers usually teach controversial topics, it is not reasonable to say that it has significantly modified their teaching practice. I argue that is the case because the foundations of both teachers' teaching philosophies were forged in a context prior to the emergence of the movement and, as the data suggests, their philosophies have not been reoriented by it.

Additionally, in chapter 6, I argued that the teachers approach resistance to the movement's discourse slightly differently, mainly due to contrasts in their perception of the current strength and level of influence of the movement's discourse in society. At the same time, both teachers suggest that the educational work of critical history teaching is the best way to resist *Escola Sem Partido's* influence in their classrooms. Additionally, both teachers articulate the importance of having a solid understanding of history education's relevance for students and their overall orientation in life in order to be in a position from which they can successfully face the challenges to their teaching practices posed by the movement. Such an understanding of the role and relevance of history education stands in stark opposition to *Escola Sem Partido's* preferred 'neutral' conception, that, if followed, would limit teachers' freedom in harmful ways. Not least because nowhere in *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse is there support for teachers' taking responsibility for ensuring a diverse, equitable and critical learning experience for their students, as proscribed by various Brazilian educational policies. On the contrary (Brazil, 2013).

In chapter 7, I argued that although Mauro and Camilo have a similar understanding of the functions and value of history, described through the *history-is-the mediator-of-coexistence-in-society* template, they implement this understanding differently. While there is a greater degree of coherence for Camilo between his ideas and practice, Mauro expresses some contradictory attitudes between the two when his teaching practice is permeated by teaching challenges.

Regarding the teachers' epistemic positioning in relation to *Escola Sem Partido*, I argued that the ideas they express about the workings and functions of history are epistemologically incompatible with the ideas expressed by the movement. On one side, *Escola Sem Partido* promotes an objectivist, traditionalist view of history, and advocates for so-called educational neutrality that silences anything that opposes its ideology. On the other hand, the teachers recognize the intrinsically political nature of history teaching and its relevance to life orientation.



Both teachers clearly articulate these differences and think, at least in part, of their teaching practices as a way of resisting or opposing the movement's ideas.

### **8.1 Implications of the study**

The literature on the *Escola Sem Partido* movement suggests that history teachers are more likely to become targets of persecution by the movement's supporters and to suffer community backlash (Moura, 2016), particularly when teaching about topics when they are perceived as controversial, for whatever reason. (Alves Maia Junior, 2022; Caetano, 2021). The literature on the teaching of controversial issues suggests that teachers must navigate tense environments and make difficult decisions when teaching such issues. Often, teachers are left alone to deal with these situations, with little support from the administration and little or no professional development. This lack of support can prevent teachers from engaging in meaningful discussions of controversial topics (Dipardo & Fehn, 2000; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Misco & Patterson, 2007).

Regarding this point, Mauro and Camilo's cases suggest that the degree of teachers' confidence to face the challenges that come when teaching controversial issues is in part linked to the support they receive from the community and their administration. On this subject, Camilo suggests that providing student-teachers and other practicing teachers with opportunities to construct solid knowledge about their role as educators through their undergraduate or professional development courses is the best way to prepare them for facing such challenges. Regarding resistance, Mauro and Camilo's case-studies suggest that critical reflection about one's own practice, and opportunities for expanding one's theoretical knowledge in combination with social activism is a vital aspect of resisting limiting discourses on education.

Additionally, the analysis of the teachers' history-as-interpretive-filter and its influence on their positioning regarding *Escola Sem Partido* offers significant insights for understanding how

they navigate such challenging situations, which could prove helpful for teachers in similar contexts. Firstly, Mauro and Camilo's narratives suggest that a solid epistemological understanding of history helps teachers remain true to their teaching philosophy when faced with adverse challenges. Secondly, their cases suggest that teachers need continuous support from school administrations and sufficient time to be reflective and to be free to innovative in their teaching practices. This recommendation is backed up by many studies on the teaching of controversial topics in history and social studies (Dipardo & Fehn, 2000; Hess, 2004; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Miller-Lane et al., 2006; Misco & Patterson, 2007; Washington & Humphries, 2011).

### **8.1 Limitations of the study**

Due to the time limitations of a master's research program, I could only investigate the narratives of two history teachers from one region in Brazil. I opted for restricting the criteria of selection of participants to teachers from the public system that had already reached tenure. This choice left unexplored the experiences of substitute or more precariously hired teachers and teachers from the private system, who are perhaps more vulnerable to job insecurity when teaching controversial issues. Additionally, it was two men that participated in this research. An analysis of women's experiences could have led to uncovering different impacts of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse. Therefore, despite the length and detail in the descriptions of Mauro and Camilo's cases, they are not generalizable to the entire category of high school history teachers in Brazil. These limitations suggest the need for further research to investigate the impact of *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse on history teachers' practices in other regions and with different demographics and levels of job security. Additionally, more research is needed to understand how *Escola Sem Partido's* discourse has impacted the social perception of history teachers throughout the past years and decade. This theme was raised in this thesis, but it was not extensively discussed.

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