Circulating the Monitorial System of Education

The Portuguese Teacher Alexandre Luís da Cunha in the Atlantic World

"By this system of education in a few years an entire nation can read."\textsuperscript{2}

The internationality of the teaching model implemented by Joseph Lancaster and Andrew Bell at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century — note that the monitorial system of education quickly exceeds the limits of the European continent, reaching the Americas and even Africa — was due to several factors: i) the existence of a network of actors who spread this model (the journey as an educational and instructive means had a particular importance here); ii) the proliferation of civil societies, in the case of the Lancastrian version, connected with the British and Foreign School Society (hereafter BFSS), headquartered in London; iii) an intense dynamic of translation and circulation of printed materials (the manuals, for instance, represent an important element for the conduct of monitorial schools).

The configuration of international educational networks whose purpose is to disseminate the monitorial teaching in the Atlantic world is the main point of the following analysis. To that end, I emphasize the contribution of a personality who — having been born in Portugal more precisely in the Madeira Island, where he firstly had contact with the teaching model proposed by Lancaster — made trips to Lisbon, London, Baltimore and Rio de Janeiro. The aim of these trips was often associated with learning and promoting the Lancastrian system of teaching.

Following recent scholarship on this subject, I assume here the existence of an interface between the local and the global, concerning dissemination and

\textsuperscript{1} I'm grateful to Filomena Lume and Rosana Barbosa Nunes for their assistance in locating papers related with Alexandre Luís da Cunha's life. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Ana Isabel Madeira and Alda Silva who helped me with some linguistic advices on the text.

circulation of pedagogical knowledge. In other words, it doesn’t seem to be legitimate to speak only about standard models replica for the explanation of the Western model of schooling. Instead, we should talk about an active interpretation of those very models according to located social and cultural spaces and actors.

Alongside with this re-contextualisation, it is certainly important to consider that the validation (and obviously the legitimacy) of a particular educational model only happens at the time of its export when it becomes therefore universal. It seems equally useful to follow Mary S. Morgan’s formulations, particularly when she affirms that facts (knowledge, generally speaking) have “travelled well” if they, firstly, maintained some of their integrity and, secondly, found new users, new uses and made new narratives (in this sense they were fruitfully).

Looking at the international dissemination of the Lancastrian teaching system through the life of a single actor – something that I consider of epistemological relevance – my claim is, as knowledge travels and circulates and finds new users, that changes are occurring in its meaning; and this isn’t incompatible with the maintenance of the core content of this specific knowledge, something that, as we will see, was taken for “granted” by the users themselves.

---


I. The introduction of the monitorial system of education in Madeira island: actors and civil societies

The introduction of the monitorial system in Madeira Island is well documented in the studies of Nelson Veríssimo and Cláudia Gouveia. We thus know that the British merchant Joseph Phelps promoted the Lancasterian system in the island. It was firstly applied at the school for boys he founded in 1819 in Funchal. Phelps, who had learnt the method in London, was its first teacher, but soon he tried to teach the system to a local citizen. Initially, Phelps did not intend to create a normal school for the training of teachers.

Even this local development in Madeira had international roots. In fact, Phelps, in late 1821, after a public subscription, instituted the Funchalense Association for Monitorial Schooling, created after the model of the BFSS. The new association, whose main objective was to promote “the education of children of the working class or poor, and improving their morale” took part of the existing diffusion network for the monitorial teaching. There was a regular contact with the British institution, as shown in many documents. Still, in 1821 an association called the Ladies School of Funchal Associates was founded, also aimed at educating poor children, but this time directed to females. Both civic institutions were supported by private donations and driven in particular by Joseph Phelps and his wife’s (Elizabet Phelps) philanthropy.

We know the regulations of these two associations. Without going into detail, once those documents are carefully mentioned in Cláudia Gouveia’s work, a characteristic aspect of the work of these associations was the charity impulse. In the case of the Funchalense Association, each subscriber had the


8 The Phelps family dedicated essentially to the wine trading, getting an important social recognition in the Madeira Island. See Cláudia Gouveia, Phelps. Percursos de uma Família Britânica na Madeira de Oitocentos.

9 The archive sources aren’t coincident concerning the foundation year of the masculine school, diverging around 1817 and 1819. I’m following the opinion of Nelson Veríssimo who is for 1819 based on some valuable arguments. See Nelson Veríssimo, “O Estabelecimento da Escola Lancastriana no Funchal”.

10 Cláudia Gouveia, Phelps. Percursos de uma Família Britânica na Madeira de Oitocentos.

11 BFSS Annual Report, concerning to the year of 1858, refers the actual involvement of the British institution in the foundation of the first monitorial school in Madeira Island.

right – depending on the amount and frequency of payment – to propose one or two boys to attend the school. Regarding to the Ladies School of Funchal Associates, part of the revenue was obtained from subscribers, and the rest were school fees. Particularly, it was accepted that “school will be open to children of people from all classes”, and the curricula specifications were clear: “reading, writing, counting and sewing, according to the system of the Foreign and English School Society”.

It is in the context of this charitable movement led by some prestigious members from Funchal society, many of them British citizens, that monitory teaching gained ground. Taking that background into account, my goal is to highlight the life and specific involvement of a local actor born in the city of Funchal. There and, as I suppose, in the American continent, he played an interesting part in the promotion of monitory teaching: Alexandre Luís da Cunha (1803-1852).

2. Alexandre Luís da Cunha: Some biographical notes

Alexandre Luís da Cunha was born in Funchal in the year of 1803, remaining there until 1828, when he was forced to exile into the United States. Da Cunha also lived for a while in London, precisely in 1823, when he was there with the purpose of learning and practicing the monitory teaching method in the Borough Road School, founded by Joseph Lancaster; then, in 1826, he spent some time in Lisbon to visit the Casa Pia Monitory School. His professional life was certainly multifaceted. In fact, at the age of 17 he was a minor order clergyman, but the modest social status of his parents prevented him from pursuing an ecclesiastical career, as he mentioned it in an application for an ecclesiastical benefit in Calheta, Madeira Island:

“Being intended for the Ecclesiastical Career with all the preparatory studies needed and full of will to pursuit it, as well as the improvement of his literary knowledge to be more qualified to serve the Church and the State, sees with great disappointment that his career cannot proceed due to the little fortune of his parents, who cannot support his studies in Coimbra where he wanted to attend the College of the Sacred Canons.”

13 “A Escola será franca a crianças de pessoas de todas as classes.” Quote in Ibidem, p. 209.
15 “Destinando-se para o Estado Eclesiástico com todos os estudos preparatórios que são necessários, não faltando nele vontade de se aplicar, e levar ao diante os seus conhecimentos literários para melhor servir a Igreja e o Estado, vê com grande dissabor que a sua carreira não pode continuar pela pouca fortuna de seus Pais, que o não podem sus-
During the 1820s, and until the exile, he was working as the owner and the editor of the journals *O Defensor da Liberdade*, *O Defensor* and *Correio da Madeira*, while he was teaching in the monitory school. The fact that he was very fluent in French and English — translations played an important role in his life — led him in 1825 to request to the Madeira governor a position as a teacher for the above mentioned languages and geography. He pleaded to raise them to established school subjects, and he even intended to implement them in the monitory school under his supervision. The rejection of his request did not impede that he applied two years later, invoking his skills in those languages, to the Queen for an official position as a translator directly to the queen as a translator (oficial de línguas) of the Madeira government, attached to the lieutenant of militia in the Funchal Regiment. Once again, he didn’t obtain this appointment.

In 1828, da Cunha suffered a major setback. By a tribunal decision from February 26, he was condemned to jail due to a so-called abuse of the freedom of press. The issue had to do with the publication of an article signed under the name of “True Liberal”, precisely in his journal *O Defensor da Liberdade*, that the judge in Funchal considered it as being offensive. Da Cunha, without doubt a liberal with strong convictions, went into exile at the time that the new conservative king Miguel I assumed the regency and initiated an absolutist restoration. He went first to the United States of America and then to Brazil, returning to Portugal only after the restoration of constitutional government in 1834.

Da Cunha’s work as a translator and author is a good example of his political engagement. He began in the 1820s translating, together with António José Gonçalves Chaves, *La Politique Naturelle, or Discours sur les Principes du Gouvernement Vrais*, written by Baron d’Holbach (London, 1773) into Portuguese and offered his translation to the Constitutional Patriotic Society. In
that same period he also translated (in a very short version) Joseph Lancaster’s seminal work, the *Manual of the System of the British and Foreign School Society of London* (London, 1816). He also cultivated the travel narrative as well as journalistic activities. He published the book *Os Estados Unidos da América Septentrional em 1830 e 1831, ou huma breve descrição geográfica, política, comercial, etc., dos mesmos* (Rio de Janeiro, 1832), where he presented authoritatively his experiences “having travelled for over two years across the United States.”

In this book, he presented realistic descriptions looking always for support in a variety of sources. For this, as he mentioned, he collected numerous “documents and materials.” He put it very clearly, showing again his liberal commitment, that he intended to write a text “at the reach of all classes of the society.” It was within this worldview that he would interpret and practice Lancaster’s teaching model.

The return to Portugal in 1834 initiated a period of his life much linked to teaching activities. It is also interesting to note that Alexandre Luís da Cunha, passing through Lisbon in July of that year returning from Brazil, when he requested a passport for free to travel to the Madeira Island, filled the form and assured to be a monitorial schoolteacher. Since 1835, while he was directing the monitorial school, he obtained an official certificate to teach English and French. Three years later, Queen Maria II appointed him at the chair of English and French in the Funchal National High School (*Liceu Nacional do Funchal*). But even before that nomination, in 1837, he had become a key actor in the local school policies: He was appointed as member of the Provincial Council of Public Instruction and of the Committee of Inspection for the Municipality of Funchal.

After years of teaching at Funchal National High School, he moved again to the United States in 1847 accompanied by his wife and children. The reason for that decision was related to the civil war called Patuleia in April 1847. Sick and in a very precarious financial situation, he came back to Funchal where he died in October 1852.

---

24 “Documentos e materiais (...)” *Ibidem,* [p. 4].
25 “Ao alcance de todas as classes da sociedade (...)” *Ibidem,* [p. 4].
26 Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, box. 45, document 72.
29 See *A Ordem,* n.º 42, 16/10/1852.
3. Da Cunha’s travels and the circulation of the monitorial system of education

Although I was not able to find a definitive proof, it can be assumed that the person Joseph Phelps introduced to the fundamentals of the monitorial system of education was Alexandre Luís da Cunha. Two circumstances give some support to this idea. The first one has to do with the fact that da Cunha propagated the method very early, at least from 1821 onwards. It is in this context that he probably translated and abridged Lancaster’s Manual of the System of the British and Foreign School Society of London (1816) and edited it as Breve Esboço do Sistema Britânico de Educação (Funchal, 1821) in Portuguese. The second circumstance has to do with Phelps’s decision of sending da Cunha to the Borough Road School in 1823 in order to perfect his knowledge about the monitorial system.

Beyond those circumstances, and in the light of the details about the life of Alexandre Luís da Cunha already presented, it is important to underline his particular perspective on the teaching system in order to pay attention to his active reception of the model. In so doing, I put the user’s own view of the system of teaching in terms of a system of beliefs and values as coexisting (and sometimes conflicting) with the meanings circulatin in the general models of the system; it is about the encounter of “specific scripts” with “certain sociocultural contexts.” Da Cunha showed a distinctive understanding of the monitorial system that was divergent from some established notions at that time. In particular, the reduction of the school curriculum to basic skills (reading, writing and counting) was a strong case in point. Da Cunha, while repeatedly claiming the superiority of monitorial teaching to all other systems of teaching, strongly advocated the expansion of knowledge to be taught in these schools. For instance, in 1835, he pleaded in a local journal for the inclusion of gymnastics, swimming, moral and political education in these schools. He clearly addressed the importance of the school in the consolidation of the new liberal after 1834, an endeavour that was not consistent with the existence of a restricted curriculum. The link between monitorial schooling and social and political transformation was not new to him. Already in the 1820s, he saw in this system more a means of social transformation, and not a means of social reproduction, as he put it in a written report, where he credited the monitorial

---

30 About that translation, see Carlos Manique da Silva, “A Apropriação de um Modelo Educacional: o Ensino Mútuo no Funchal nas Primeiras Décadas de Oitocentos”, in Revista Linhas 11(2010), 2, pp. 68-84.


32 See Rogério Fernandes, “Educação e Ensino Popular na Madeira (Séc. XVIII-1840)”.
system as being "one of the greatest discoveries of the human spirit." He assumed that one of the results guaranteed by the monitorial system, the shortening of the time of learning, would have great impact in this transformation.

Shifts in meaning and priorities were also evident at the level of didactic materials. In fact, in March 1825, he expressed the intention of establishing a printing house with the purpose of printing lessons and books for his monitorial school. The printed lessons were mostly intended to be posted on the classroom walls, which allowed the operations of the class learning techniques proposed by Joseph Lancaster. However, the adoption of books was clearly away from the fundamentals of the model as Elizabeth Phelps, Joseph Phelps' wife, still believed in 1856:

"The system in use (the Lancasterian) is the less expensive known. Its economy consists in the lack of books or booklets for the elementary teaching, replaced by wooden learning boards. These are so durable that mostly who are serving today at School are in use since 1821, and this is one of the reasons (among others) that forces the Direction to maintain the integrity of that system."

The inclusion of textbooks into monitorial schools was significant at different levels. First, it put a distance to the controversial proposal of a "scriptural education" exclusively based on paper walls that focused on the Bible as a central piece in the education of children, as Lancaster had defined it. Second, Lancaster's emphasis in the field of elementary skills was clearly on the side of reading and not writing and, in this sense, there is a significant difference with the Portuguese tradition of elementary schooling based on writing and calligraphy, as da Cunha had already formulated in his Breve Esboço do Systema Britânico de Educação. Third, and most important, this interest in books also

---

33 "Uma das maiores descobertas do espírito humano (...)" O Defensor da Liberdade, n.º 16, 25/07/1827, supplement. That memory about the monitorial system of education was provided to the Minister of the Kingdom and contained the outline of some educational reforms, including, as expected, the generalization of the method.

34 See Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Madeira e Porto Santo, document 9048.

35 "O sistema em uso (o lancasteriano) é o mais barato que se conhece. A sua economia consiste na ausência de livros ou cartilhas para o ensino elementar, substituindo no seu lugar, lições em pautas de tábuas. Estas estão tão duráveis, que a maior parte das que servem hoje na Escola estão em uso desde 1821, e este é um dos motivos (entre outros) que obriga a Direcção a manter a integridade daquele sistema." See the letter from Elizabeth Phelps to José Ferreira Passos in Instituto dos Arquivos Nacionais/Torre do Tombo, Ministério do Reino, pack 3571, July 1st, 1856.

36 For the understanding of this issue is certainly important to refer that in the 1850s, the School of girls, that one who is mentioned by Elizabeth Phelps, was reported as Protestant and being supported almost exclusively by donations from British citizens, See British and Foreign School Society, Annual Report (London, 1858).

37 See Carlos Manique da Silva, "A Apropriação de um Modelo Educacional: o Ensino Mútuo no Funchal nas Primeiras Décadas de Oitocentos".
expressed his project of extending the scope of the school curriculum offered in monitorial schools.

Beyond these shifts in the meaning and reach of monitorial schooling, his travels to London allowed him to assert an authority about the method that built on his “direct” experiences in Lancaster’s normal school. This was certainly a risky claim because, although he affirmed to be “fully instructed in the British System”, 38 evidence suggests a more superficial knowledge of the functioning of the model school. In one letter written by Phelps in Funchal and sent to the BFSS in London in February 1st, 1824, he described his stay as not being particularly long: “Mr. Cunha on his arrival was fortunate enough to find a vacancy of a position paid by the Crown; and on my applying to the Governor, he was kind enough to say that he had not intended filling up the situation [...] Towards the latter end of November he was appointed to the situation, and on the 1st December he took possession of our School, with a salary from the Crown of R. 300, equal to about 64l. per annum; the Society will give him something besides. I was rather fearful that he had not made sufficient progress in the system, considering the short time he had been able to practice it in England; but I am happy to say, he more than answers our expectations.” 39

In spite of his short stay in London, Alexandre Luis da Cunha didn’t mind to invoke the experience of Borough Road School as well as the diploma conferred on him by order of the Duke of Sussex to legitimize his intervention in the importing of the ‘right’ version of the monitorial teaching. 40 For instance, after a visit at the Casa Pia Monitorial School in Lisbon in 1826, he criticized the practices adopted in this normal school for teachers training in the capital city. He pointed at the fact that the teacher in charge, João José Le Cocq, had received his training in the method in Paris. 41 Da Cunha referred particularly to the absence of an “application school” in this school. 42 From his point of view, it wasn’t enough to teach knowledge from a “master” to a “learner” and he illustrated this criticism using a military metaphor: “it was never seen to

41 Ibidem.
42 Ibidem. It is interesting to note that the adoption of monitorial schooling in Portugal is closely associated with the specialized training of teachers. See, for example, Rogério Fernandes, “A diffusão do ensino mútuo em Portugal no começo do século XIX”, in Maria Helena Câmara Bastos and Luciano Mendes Faria Filho (eds.), A Escola Elementar no Século XIX (Passo Fundo: EDIUPF, 1999), pp. 25-43; Carlos Manique da Silva, Do modo de aprender e de ensinar. Renovação pedagógica e cenários de experimentação da escola graduada (1834-1892) (Lisboa: FPCE/UL, 2008 [tese de doutorado]).
teach officers for a regiment without the presence of the soldiers.”\textsuperscript{43} He underlined this idea as follows: “They must teach [schoolteachers] as it is done in England, that in this branch far exceeds France (where Le Cocq learned), leaving them work in a practice session, running through all levels of education, and after they have made a written and practical exam, they should have a Manual, or Regulation of the system, to be used as a guide in case of doubt.”\textsuperscript{44}

His judgement simultaneously pointed at different issues. Firstly, he established a hierarchy of countries focusing on the one where he had learnt, at least for a short period, the operations of the system. Secondly, he recognized the manuals of this system of teaching as being important regulators in its implementation and ensuring some of its integrity in its diffusion\textsuperscript{45} and somewhat counteracting the reinterpretations and shifts taking place at local, regional or continental levels (which, in essence, did not change the organizational structure of the model). Consistently with this view, and emphasizing the importance that these manuals had in the encoding of monitorial education, da Cunha planned to translate into Portuguese Lancaster’s Manual of the System.\textsuperscript{46}

Beyond his efforts to promote monitorial schooling in the Madeira Island, I assume that he used his knowledge of the system in order to make a living in his time in exile in the United States and Brazil between 1818 and 1834. Unfortunately, concerning this period I do not have much information. The BFSS correspondence with da Cunha hinted at the possibility of exporting the monitorial system to these countries: “Even in Madeira our schools have severely suffered. It appears by a letter received in February, from the late master of the boys’ school there, that the governor first deprived him of his salary, and that after an attempt to maintain the school on other resources, he was obliged to retire to America. His letter is dated from Baltimore, but he intended to carry the British system with him to Brazil.”\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{43} “Nunca se viu ensinarem-se oficiais para um regimento, sem estarem na forma com os soldados [...]” O Defensor da Liberdade, n.\textdegree{} 16, 25/07/1827, supplement.

\textsuperscript{44} “Devem ensinar-se [os mestres] como se faz em Inglaterra que neste ramo excede muito a França (onde o tal Le Cocq aprendeu), deixando-os trabalhar de per si numa aula prática, correndo por todos os graus de ensino, e depois de fazerem um exame escrito, é prático, devem então ter um Manual, ou Regulamento do sistema, pelo qual se guiam em caso de dúvida.” See Ibidem.

\textsuperscript{45} About the dynamics of production, dissemination and translation of printed materials during the spread of monitorial education in the early decades of the nineteenth century, see Marcelo Caruso (Coord.), Globalization and Printing. An International Research Guide for the History of the Bell-Lancaster System of Mutual Teaching in the 19th Century (Berlin, July 2007 [research report]).

\textsuperscript{46} See O Defensor da Liberdade, n.\textdegree{} 16, 25/07/1827, supplement.

\textsuperscript{47} British and Foreign School Society, Annual Report (London, 1829), p. 27.
I do not have conclusive data to support that his stay in Baltimore had something to do with the fact that Joseph Lancaster established in that city in the early 1820s, founding the Lancasterian Institute and publishing a new edition of one of his manuals (The Lancasterian System of Education with Improvements, Baltimore, 1821). In the case of Brazil, da Cunha established in Rio de Janeiro in 1832 and published there, in a prestigious local publisher (Gueffier), the already mentioned work Os Estados Unidos da América Septentrional. Regardless of this lack of information it is indeed very suggestive that he still invoked his condition as a monitorial schoolteacher in his already mentioned application for a passport in 1834 on his return to Portugal.

4. Conclusions:
Partial transformation through Atlantic circulation.

The successful circulation of the monitorial system in the 19th century was certainly closely linked with a set of very attractive ideas, namely the shortening of the time of learning and the low costs of providing schooling to big groups. Promoters of monitorial schooling envisioned the possibility of solving the problem related to popular education in one generation mainly based in these two attractive traits of the system.

The circulation of this system of teaching fostered both identity and differences. The maintenance of the core of the system was at the basis of the effect of partial standardization of teaching scenarios across countries. Yet also different interpretations and technological changes, as those envisioned or initiated by Alexandre Luís da Cunha, produced a series of variations and differences of practices and meanings. I see that in the process of circulation the integrity of the main features of the model somewhat prevailed and the system remained recognizable to different contemporaries in many countries. Particularly, Elizabeth Phelps' position still 1856 shows how resilient educational knowledge can be even in the eyes of distant users.

Nonetheless, educational knowledge is socially constructed within "communication networks", where the different actors are converging and diverging from each other, making the reception, interpretation and dissemination of this knowledge a central part of the story.48 This dynamics, following different backgrounds and interests, assigned different meanings to educational processes. Within the Atlantic world da Cunha knew, meanings may have been differentiated, but communicable, and this led to a form of circulation that displayed processes of partial transformation of educational knowledge, a

transformation that did not affected the core features of the model of monitorial schooling.
References

A Ordem Nr. 42, 1852, 16 Jg. Nr. 10.
ARQUIVO HISTÓRICO ULTRAMARINO: Box. 45. Document 72. Madeira, Porto Santo.
ARQUIVO HISTÓRICO ULTRAMARINO: Document 8940. Madeira, Porto Santo.
ARQUIVO HISTÓRICO ULTRAMARINO: Document 9048. Madeira, Porto Santo.
ARQUIVO HISTÓRICO ULTRAMARINO: Documents 10261 to 10263. Madeira, Porto Santo.
ARQUIVO REGIONAL DA MADEIRA: Atas do Conselho Provincial de Instrução Pública. 1837.
DA CUNHA, Alexandre Luís: Os Estados Unidos da América Septentrional em 1830 e 1831, ou huma breve descrição geographica, política, comercial, etc., dos mesmos. Rio de Janeiro 1832.
INSTITUTO DOS ARQUIVOS NACIONAIS / TORRE DO TOMBO: Registo de Mercês. D. Maria II. Lisboa 1838.


O Campeão Português em Lisboa. 1822, vol. II.

O Defensor da Liberdade Nr. 16, 1827, 17. Jg., Nr. 7 (Beilage).

O Defensor da Liberdade Nr. 92, 1828, 18. Jg., Nr. 4.


DA SILVA, Carlos Manique: Do modo de aprender e de ensinar. Renovação pedagógica e cenários de experimentação da escola graduada (1834-1892). Diss. FPCE/UL Lissabon 2008 (unveröff.).
