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Material and immaterial sources in the history of women educators based on the work of the PEMO group

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Abstract: The research aims to discuss the importance of historical (i)material sources for recording and preserving the history and memory of female teachers who contributed so much to the educational development of society and who were not properly valued. The study is based on the theoretical assumptions of New Cultural History (Burke, 1992), with its expansion of the subjects and objects of history. Based on the analysis of academic productions (theses and dissertations) from the Educational Practices, Memories, and Oralities group, linked to the State University of Ceará, the sources that supported the biographical research with educators conducted between 2020 and 2024 were identified, as well as the way in which they were treated for the (re)writing of historical narratives in the field of education history. It was concluded that the character of the source is raised from the dialogical problematization between researcher and object and that the broadening of the concepts of sources and subjects of history allowed new perspectives to be cast on the writing of the biography of educators.

Keywords: history of education; historical sources; biographies of female educators; biographical research; history of women.

1 Introduction

For centuries, history was written by men and about men, as it focused on extolling political trajectories, great deeds, and figures of social and economic prestige (Le Goff, 2013). Exemplary hagiographic narratives were produced: those of war heroes, kings, and the chosen ones to take center stage in history (Dosse, 2015).

In this historical context, largely shaped by male records, for a long time women had their stories excluded from official history; they were silenced and neglected. After all, their participation was predominantly limited to the private sphere, the home, which was not given due importance (Fialho; Santos; Sales, 2019). Moreover, because women gained access to writing later, their accounts were relegated to secrecy; they were forgotten among diary pages, protected by padlocks so they would never be made public. Thus, historiographical narrative belonged to men (Perrot, 2019).



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It was men's dominant discourse that framed narratives of what was taken to be historical facts or events, revering them in official historiography. In this way, their traces were considered sources for explaining social dynamics over time. Similarly, dominance in the discursive field also elucidated this relationship of male power (Foucault, 2012).

It was only after a paradigm shift in the practice of historiography, proposed by the third generation of the Annales School in the mid-twentieth century, that historians expanded research possibilities by reframing what could be considered a historical source, treating as such everything that could tell the story of people over time (Burke, 1992). In light of this conception, previously invisible groups (women, Black people, children, Indigenous peoples, etc.) began to gain space in historical narratives and to be recognized as subjects of history.

Consequently, scholarship in the field broadened the discussion of historical sources. The influence of anthropology brought to history the perspective of intangible culture, which involves "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and techniques together with the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated with them [...]" (UNESCO, 2003, p. 4).

In this context, to recount women's trajectories, whether in the private or public sphere, sources were needed. This compelled researchers in the field to draw on a mosaic of possibilities: from material sources, such as official documents, diaries, printed materials, personal objects, and visual sources, to immaterial sources, such as oral accounts, songs, and everyday practices. Interweaving these material and immaterial sources became fundamental for understanding and writing a history of women. Visiting their autobiographical accounts, listening to their recollections, reading their notes, analyzing photographs and paintings, and identifying representations embedded in adornments, utensils, and clothing became indispensable for a history written by and for women.

From this point, focusing on the contributions of women's history to the history of education points to the need to consider how much women educators were silenced in the official accounts of this field. With that in mind, this study aims to discuss the importance of material and immaterial sources, respectively tangible and intangible traces, for recording and preserving the history and memory of women teachers who contributed so much to society's educational formation and were not duly valued.

This research is relevant because it proposes a theoretical-methodological reflection on the possibilities of sources in writing the history of women educators, based on the theoretical assumptions of the New Cultural History and on the experience of writing hermeneutic biographical studies developed within the research group *Educational Practices, Memories, and Oralities* (PEMO), institutionalized by the State University of Ceará (UECE) and endorsed by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

In view of this, the theoretical and methodological paths to be followed by those who devote themselves to writing the history of women educators are discussed, emphasizing the use of historical sources, their materiality, and research possibilities arising from their interweaving. As a result, the focus turns to the experience of the research carried out at PEMO, where the authors of this chapter are involved as researchers.

The PEMO group was created in 2014 and became linked to UECE's Graduate Program in Education (PPGE) in 2015, with the aim of contributing studies, research, and discussions on educational practices, memories, and oralities of women educators. Over more than a decade, PEMO's researchers have been engaged in writing biographies of women teachers, especially from Ceará, discussing their contributions to the history of education.

The studies developed by the group adopt a hermeneutic biographical perspective, seeking to be faithful to reality without claiming to understand it fully; however, they value a reflective and interpretive narrative that opposes determinisms, unquestionable truths, and rigorous causalities (Dosse, 2015). From this perspective, Levi (2006) argues that the hermeneutic strand of biography proposes greater problematization of biographical material, which suggests greater methodological rigor.

It is also important to note that PEMO's research does not seek to define an ideal type of educator. On the contrary, it aims to encompass a plurality of women's trajectories, recording women's contributions in educational contexts, preserving women's life histories, and valuing them as protagonists. Thus, the group has already produced biographies of lay educators (Aída Balaio, Maria Lilian Teixeira), Indigenous educators (Raimundinha Marques Tremembé, Iraci Cassiano Soares), Black educators (Zuleide Queiroz, Zelma Madeira), trans educators (Letícia Carolina Pereira do Nascimento, José Honorata Neta), elite educators (Henriqueta Galeno, Alba Frota,

and Edite Braga), religious educators (Sister Maria Montenegro, Sister Rita), political educators (Maria Luiza Fontenele, Izolda Cela), among others.

To narrate the lives of women educators with a focus on their formative trajectories and their work in the educational field, it was necessary to consider the complexities embedded in the many particularities of women's existences, situated in different social, political, cultural, and educational contexts and in distinct historical times. In light of this, the theoretical assumptions of cultural history were chosen to support hermeneutic biographical studies (Dosse, 2015).

Having made these introductory considerations, the discussion now turns to how the "new" cultural history helped to reframe the notion of historical source and made the scientific undertaking of biographies of women educators possible. Next, the importance of material and immaterial sources in writing the history of women is discussed. Then, dissertations and theses produced by the PEMO group over the last five years are analyzed, with emphasis on the sources used. Finally, the use of oral history in biographical productions about women educators in the history of education is debated, since oral sources are the most predominant.

2 The "New" Cultural History and the expansion of historical subjects and problems

As mentioned in the introductory part of this chapter, in the nineteenth century history focused on major political deeds and on male protagonism. Influenced by Leopold von Ranke's thought, it sought the status of an objective science, in which the historian presented the facts to readers "as they really happened" (Burke, 1992, p. 15). This so-called Rankean history should be read as the traditional paradigm of history.

We could also call this paradigm the common-sense view of history, not in order to praise it, but to point out that it has often, very often, been regarded as the way to do history, rather than being seen as one among several possible approaches to the past (Burke, 1992, p. 15).

In this direction, although this conception of history has already been questioned in later studies (Le Goff, 2013; Bloch, 1941; Barros, 2013), it continues to influence historiographical practice and the perception many people have of what constitutes historians' object of study. Indeed, positivist history is still present in many textbooks, relegating culture and ordinary subjects to a secondary level of importance,

while men's political trajectories and their achievements run through most of the content (Medeiros *et al.*, 2021).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the historiographical discipline began to be influenced by other fields, especially sociology and anthropology, shifting from a “narrative history” to a “problem-oriented history” (Cardoso, 1997). Many historians began to realize that it was not possible to write an objective history, since human beings write it from their experiences and from the values that have shaped them over time; thus, the historical fact is reinterpreted from the standpoint of whoever narrates it.

The proposal of a problem-oriented history emerged, rather than a static history, a view consolidated through the Annales School, founded in 1929 by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch through the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. The Annales movement framed this paradigm shift in historiographical practice by proposing a new outlook and a new practice, as Castro (1997, p. 42) explains:

The journal and the movement founded by Bloch and Febvre, in France, in 1929, became the most effective and enduring expression against a factualist historiography centered on the ideas and decisions of great men, on battles, and on diplomatic strategies. Against it, they proposed a problem-oriented history, made possible by opening the discipline to the themes and methods of the other human sciences, in a constant process of broadening objects and refining methodology.

This broadening of objects is grounded primarily in the third phase of the Annales School, in the 1970s, influenced mainly by the historians Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, who published a collection entitled *Faire l'histoire*, proposing an expansion of history's problems, approaches, and objects (Le Goff; Nora, 1979). “In the sampling of new objects of history, there are works on climate, the unconscious, myth, everyday life, mentalities, language” (Janotti, 2023, p. 15).

From this point on, research began to consider every human action as an object of history. As a result, there was an expansion of interdisciplinary studies with the most varied emphases, generating criticism about excessive fragmentation. History came to be seen “[...] as a fragmented field, compartmentalized, divided into a wide range of subspecialties, and crossed by many, many trends” (Barros, 2013, p. 9).

This phase of history's hyper-specialization, the third phase of the Annales School, became known as the “New History,” characterized, according to Peter Burke (1992), by valuing what stands in opposition. “What was previously considered

immutable is now regarded as a 'cultural construction,' subject to variations in both time and space" (Burke, 1992, p. 11).

From this paradigm shift, it is also possible to discuss the emergence of the "New Cultural History," which gained strength in the 1980s. Barros (2013, p. 56) emphasizes that this term refers to everything that "has turned to the cultural dimension of a given society." Thus, the New Cultural History does not focus only on so-called high culture, but on all cultural expressions.

It opens itself to the most varied studies, such as "popular culture," "literate culture," "representations," discursive practices shared by different social groups, educational systems, cultural mediation through intellectuals, or any other thematic fields permeated by the polysemic notion of "culture" (Barros, 2013, p. 55).

From this perspective, it is important to note the relevance of the studies of the historian Roger Chartier, who introduced the concepts of "practices" and "representations," essential for understanding culturally mediated social relations. Barros (2013) comments that cultural practices would be uses and customs, "ways of doing," while representations would correspond to "ways of seeing." However, "Representations can include ways of thinking and feeling, including collective ones, but are not limited to them" (Barros, 2013, p. 82).

In sum, acknowledging the impossibility of achieving objectivity and the particularities inherent to the Human Sciences, researchers moved through the twentieth century seeking, in the subject and in subjectivity, their object of investigation, without losing sight of methodological rigor as a possibility for writing. With regard to historical studies, this concerns the way researchers deal with sources. In line with this, it is important to discuss the (im)materiality of sources, especially with respect to the female universe, to which this research is dedicated.

3 Women's history and the (im)materiality of sources

Women were long kept out of this account, as if, destined for obscurity, for an unnameable reproduction, they were outside time, or at least outside the event. Confined to the silence of the abyssal sea (Perrot, 2019, p. 16).

As Perrot (2019) notes in the epigraph above, there is a profound silencing with regard to women's presence in historiographical accounts until the mid-twentieth century. Despite the considerable number of studies addressing women and their trajectories after the 1980s, research in the field of women's history underwent gradual

transformations at a slow pace over time for women to be positioned as protagonists in the public sphere. “The history of women has changed. In its objects, in its points of view. It moved from a history of the body and of roles performed in private life to arrive at a history of women in the public space” (Perrot, 2019, p. 15).

It is also important to emphasize that, with the expansion of research possibilities resulting from the new conception of what counted as historical sources, other subjects, as in the case of women, also began to be seen as protagonists of their practices: workers, ordinary people, children, educators, among others. After all, history was broadening its gaze, its objects, and its problems.

Women, then, became the object of a significant number of studies in the twenty-first century. Silva (2008) points to the importance of problematizing the factors that contributed to women becoming part of historical narrative, highlighting women themselves as researchers within universities, since they tend to study what is close to them.

The discovery that women had a history and that it was worth searching for it thus resulted from the very questions they, at a certain moment in their lives, asked about themselves, rejecting a structure of male supremacy solidly accepted and denying the classic idea of the inferiority of the female subject (Silva, 2008, p. 225).

Thus, by looking at the silencing surrounding women’s achievements in historiographical accounts, women researchers were able to narrow the gender gap that existed in historical narratives. In this sense, the work of the historian Natalie Zemon Davis stands out for expanding the scope of sources in her research on ordinary people, especially women. By drawing closer to anthropology and literary theory, the author sought to analyze cultural practices in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In the work *Women on the Margins*, published in 1995, Natalie Davis tells the story of three seventeenth-century women: Glikl bas Judah Leib, a Jewish woman; Marie de l’Incarnation, a nun; and Maria Sibylla, a naturalist and painter. To discuss these women’s trajectories, Davis broadens the notion of sources, analyzing correspondence, personal accounts, and illustrations.

In Glikl’s case, we saw her relationship with non-Jews; [...] Marie de l’Incarnation and Maria Sibylla Merian found that the margins involved real power relations with non-European peoples: Marie as a matriarchal teacher of

Amerindians, Maria as an owner of African, Carib, and Arawak slaves. (Davis, 1997, p. 21-22).

Davis (1997) makes a point of bringing to light the trajectories of these women on the margins, silenced by official accounts. Although she seeks out these figures, the author did not intend to portray them as passive subjects of their time; rather, she aimed to foreground their agency. "On the contrary, she shows how these women made the most of the circumstances in which they lived" (Basso, 2010, p. 214).

From the work of historians such as Natalie Davis and Michele Perrot arises the question: how can sources that speak about women be found if their traces were neither valued nor preserved? How can society be shown that women's achievements matter to history and, in particular, to the history of education?

The difficulty of reconstructing their steps, actions, and contributions is itself evidence of their silencing. Indeed, the social memory of women's lives was "[...] being lost more through ideological forgetting than through a real lack of documents" (Dias, 1984, p. 7).

Writing about women, as about other historical subjects, requires sources and the mapping of their traces. As a result, this writing process becomes arduous work, demanding that the researcher use a multiplicity of sources and research methods. As Xavier, Fialho, and Vasconcelos (2018, p. 34) emphasize, "methods are the paths to be followed with intentionality and movement along the research journey."

The path to be followed in developing research on women will depend on the object under study, the theoretical framework to be used, and the availability of sources. There is no historical research without sources, but it is essential to broaden one's understanding of what can be considered a research source, especially when the feminine is under analysis. After all, historical sources are made up of every trace of life through time, and many women left records of their traces that have not yet been erased, whether through visual sources, printed materials, utensils, clothing, letters, diaries, paintings, oral narratives, personal, institutional, and official documents, among others.

Beyond locating sources, it is important to understand that the scientific character of research is shaped by how the researcher analyzes sources and manages to enter into dialogue with them. Therefore, sources need to be problematized so they

are not taken as absolute truths. As Le Goff (2013) highlights, the document must be understood in its broad sense.

In this light, in the practice of biographical writing on the history of women educators, the researcher deals with a multiplicity of possible historical sources. However, as Barros (2020, p. 12) points out, it is the dialogical relationship between the research problem and the traces found that gives substance to a source of history.

To constitute sources, as in many other examples that could be given, is to displace documents from their original locations and functions, or to bring them to the surface from their silent ocean and illuminate them with new problems. Yes, the problem constitutes the source. But, on the other hand, a past-present that has reached us in the form of a text or an object, a photograph or a trace of any kind, can also inspire or pose problems anew for historians. The problem and the source, so to speak, constitute one another in a dialectical relationship.

Therefore, there is no point in assembling a robust collection of documents on women if the researcher does not ask the right questions. There is no use in gathering information if it is not properly problematized. The meaning of historiographical narrative is constituted through this relationship between historian, object, and documents: a reflective and hermeneutic dialectic that cannot be stripped of subjectivity or of rigorous engagement with sources, if it is to make possible, through problematization, new versions of history in which women gain visibility.

Based on what has been set out, the next section discusses works produced by the PEMO group, with emphasis on the types of sources used, with a view to constructing narratives about women educators' contributions to the history of education. The plurality of sources employed makes it possible to better understand the complexity of the biographical subjects and their trajectories.

4 Sources used in the PEMO group's biographical research

The use of biographies in the field of the history of education has grown substantially at the beginning of the twenty-first century, especially with regard to women. This use follows the changes that took place in the field of history after the 1980s, since, in earlier times, biographies were regarded by historians as minor studies because of their exemplary character, as in hagiographies, or their exaltation of men seen as great heroes.

Dosse (2015) stresses, however, that the genre has changed over the centuries, especially after the third generation of the *Annales*. Thus, biography came to be seen as a form of writing capable of scientific rigor. “Considering the human being as fundamentally plural, maintaining diverse bonds, changes the approach to the biographical genre” (Dosse, 2015, p. 297).

That said, within the new biographical paradigm, the subject comes to be seen through contradictions and ambiguities, taking into account individual and collective dimensions, with human life understood as inseparable from its historical context. As Viñao Frago (2002) points out, it is important to consider subjects’ subjectivity and personal experience when analyzing historical facts.

With this understanding, it is important to note that, in the studies developed by the PEMO group, hermeneutic biographies are used as a possible way of writing life narratives focused on the educational formation and professional practice of women teachers, giving visibility to women educators and their educational contributions (Fialho; Souza, 2023).

“The set of facts connected to an individual, no matter how correctly described, is not enough to explain them” (Avelar; Schmidt, 2018, p. 8). Indeed, the aim is not to address every nuance of a woman’s life, but to contextualize the lived experience of certain educators, recording and preserving their histories while enabling a broader understanding of the history of education. Moreover, by problematizing an educator’s work as a subject in a given period from a hermeneutic perspective, it becomes possible to discuss relevant aspects of the history of education, such as curricula, formative trajectories, and educational practices, as well as how these aspects have changed over time.

It was therefore decided to list the theses and dissertations produced by the PEMO group over the last five years (2020-2024) on biographies of women educators and the types of sources used in the studies. As a result, it was possible to map the kinds of sources that helped compose meanings in hermeneutic biographical writing about women. In fact, each researcher wove their web of meanings from the sources they handled, thereby enriching discussions about these educators’ work in the history of education.

Table 1 – Theses and dissertations developed at PEMO/UECE on biographies of women educators, from 2020 to 2024

TITLE	TYPE	AUTHOR	SOURCES USED	YEAR
Biography of educator Alba de Mesquita Frota and her work at the <i>City of the Child</i> (1937-1954)	Dissertation	Stascxak, Francinalda Machado.	Parish records, official gazettes, certificates, journals, the biographee's gravestone, photographs, oral accounts.	2021
Educational Biography of Luiza de Teodoro	Thesis	Freire, Vitoria Chérída Costa.	The biographee's criminal case files and records, books, poems, invitations, minutes, photographs, and oral accounts.	2022
The education of Maria Lilian Teixeira: from childhood at the landfill to higher education (1984-2014)	Thesis	Carvalho, Scarlett O' Hara Costa.	School records, certificates, personal documents, newspaper articles, photographs, and oral accounts.	2022
"I can't be the village's teacher, but I can be the city's mayor": Biography of Iraci Cassiano Soares	Thesis	Mendes, Marcia Cristiane Ferreira.	School records, personal documents, Indigenous reports, FUNAI collections, photographs, and oral accounts.	2022
Maria José Barbosa and her contribution to youth and adult education in Ceará (1995 to 2015)	Dissertation	Nogueira, Aurinete Alves.	School records, undergraduate degree diploma, a newspaper report, the biographee's thesis, photographs, and oral accounts.	2023
Reminiscences on educational conditions in Ceará's interior based on the teaching work of Marieta Benício and Maria José de Sousa (1936-1984)	Thesis	Sousa, Francisca Genifer Andrade de.	Biographical note, letter, invitation, health card, videos, photographs, and oral accounts.	2023
Adelaide Gonçalves: memories of education, teaching contributions, and	Thesis	Sousa, Ana Carolina Braga de.	Photographs, newspaper articles, school records, the author's autobiographical	2023

concrete utopias of an educator, historian, and political and social activist from Ceará (1978-2019)			memorial, books, pamphlets, and oral accounts.	
Raimundinha Marques Tremembé: protagonist of Differentiated Indigenous Education in Ceará (1991-2009)	Thesis	Pinto, Arlene Stephanie Menezes Pereira.	Phonographic album, music album, books, decrees, a newspaper article, websites, a YouTube video, the biographee's memorial, and oral accounts.	2023
Education and teaching practice of the <i>travesti</i> ¹ Letícia Carolina Pereira do Nascimento (2007-2018)	Thesis	Costa, Maria Aparecida Alves da.	Photographs, invitations, certificates, memoranda, and oral accounts.	2023
The work of educator Edite Braga at the Ceará Normal School (1922-1938)	Dissertation	Pereira, Lidiane da Silva.	Parish records, newspaper articles, personal documents and photos, official documents, the family tomb, books, and oral accounts.	2024
Biography of a quilombola educator: teacher education and the work of Maria do Socorro Eugenio da Silva (1955-2001)	Thesis	Cunha, Fernanda Ielpo da.	Certificates, school records, official documents, educational legislation, photographs, and oral accounts.	2024

Source: The Authors

The works were accessed in full, with emphasis on the methodological section, by consulting the PPGE/UECE website, where the dissertations and theses are publicly available: <https://www.uece.br/ppge/pesquisa/dissertacoes/>, on March 7, 2025. All works within the defined time frame, developed in Line A of the PPGE, called “Education, Didactics, and Teaching Work,” which were included in the nucleus “History

¹ In the Brazilian context, *travesti* is a self-identified gender category with specific historical, social, and political meanings. For this reason, the term is kept in Portuguese (in italics) rather than translated as “trans woman” or “transgender woman,” which may not capture its full specificity.

and Memory of Teacher Education,” originating from research conducted within PEMO, were included. This is because the aforementioned nucleus states in its syllabus that:

It is dedicated to discussing the history of education, with emphasis on women's education and professional practice, based on the biography of women educators. By highlighting their sociocultural contexts at the interface with formative trajectories and pedagogical practices, it preserves the memory of women, of school institutions, and of their contributions to the educational field (PPGE UECE, 2025, sp.)¹.

Mapping the sources used for the biographical narratives made it possible to infer that oral sources predominated, whether autobiographical accounts collected from the biographee herself or accounts from people who lived with the biographee (family members, co-workers, former students, etc.). All the studies drew on the interweaving of these narratives with other sources, such as documents available in publicly accessible archives, the biographees' personal objects, memoir books, visual records, magazine and newspaper reports, school documents, among others.

Regarding the choice of oral history, it is important to note that, rather than treating oral sources as unquestionable truth and an uncontested narrative, they must be understood in their singularity, composed of fragments of many lived experiences, intentions, and subjectivities that sometimes escape the researchers' gaze. As Portelli (2006, p. 106) states, when working with oral history, “We are dealing with a multiplicity of fragmented and internally divided memories, all, in one way or another, ideologically and culturally mediated.”

From a classificatory perspective, the material sources, as physical traces of the educators' activities most often analyzed, were: historical documents, printed materials, manuscripts, books, and photographs. However, it was the range of immaterial sources that was most discussed, generally approached through orality, such as oral history interviews, school celebrations, religious manifestations, habits, customs, dances, and educational practices.

As Le Goff (2013) emphasizes, these memory traces do not make sense in isolation, because they need to be problematized in light of who produced them, why they were kept, and who kept them. This is especially true in biographical research with living women educators, where there is a risk that the biographers may allow

¹ To learn more about the PPGE/UECE lines of research, nuclei, and syllabi, consult the syllabi available at: <https://www.uece.br/ppge/ensino/linha-de-pesquisa/doutorado/>.

themselves to be led by the biographee. After all, the researcher cannot restrict themselves to telling a story based only on documents intentionally kept by the biographee and provided by them.

Among the studies analyzed, the work of Francinalda Stascxak (2013) stands out. While writing the biography of the already-deceased educator Alba Frota (1937-1954) during a period of social isolation due to Covid-19, the researcher sought the biographee's relatives through social media groups. Despite the scarcity of documents and difficulties accessing archives, Francinalda Stascxak (2013) built the narrative about Alba Frota's work at the *City of the Child* by mobilizing parish records, the state and municipal official gazette, certificates, journals, the biographee's gravestone, photographs, and oral accounts.

Stephanie Pereira (2023) and Márcia Mendes (2022) developed biographies of Indigenous educators, taking their oral narratives into account; however, they needed to draw on an understanding of specific legislation and forms of expression particular to the peoples studied, such as the chants sung by the Tremembés and Potiguaras. With respect to using chants as a historical source, Napolitano (2023, p. 236) notes that it is "[...] necessary to perceive audiovisual and musical sources in their internal structures of language and their mechanisms for representing reality."

Continuing the analysis, Fernanda Cunha (2024) studied the quilombola educator Maria do Socorro Eugenio da Silva, the first Black educator in her community to become literate and to work as a lay teacher. By visiting the Municipal Social Security Institute of Quixadá (IPMQ), the researcher gained access to a substantial portion of the available record on Maria do Socorro's formative process, in order to broaden the understanding of the oral narratives that guided the inquiry.

Vitória Freire (2022), among the sources listed, presents an analysis of criminal records relating to the educator Luiza de Teodoro, a Black woman, activist, and political target during the Military Dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1985). Through the inquiries, it is possible to see that the biographee was sought by the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS) for actions considered subversive. However, juxtaposing this document with oral accounts shows that, because of personal relationships she had built, the educator was not arrested. Thus, it becomes possible to understand how the counterpoint among multiple sources becomes essential in the practice of biographical writing.

Carolina Sousa (2023) and Maria Aparecida Costa (2023) wrote biographies of teachers accustomed to steering their own narratives through militancy in their fields of work. The challenge, in this case, was to produce a writing dissociated from “writing of the self,” also valuing documentary, visual, and printed sources, beyond the oral sources that were prioritized.

Lidiane Pereira (2024), in writing the biography of an early twentieth-century educator, drew on the interweaving of private and public archives, problematizing the sources kept by the biographee’s family and cross-referencing them with those found in other collections, such as documentary sources available at the Public Archive of Ceará and newspaper articles available at the Public Library and the National Digital Newspaper Library. In this way, the researcher was able to counterpose discourses, rather than being led by narratives imposed by the biographee’s family.

Scarlett Carvalho (2022) discussed the distinctive educational context of Maria Lilian Teixeira. The work focuses on the path the educator followed that enabled her to enter university despite a poor childhood as a waste picker at a landfill. The author thus cross-references oral accounts with the biographee’s school documents and reports on her work in the community.

Aurinete Nogueira (2023) and Francisca Sousa (2023) recount the trajectories of educators by prioritizing oral narrative, even though visual sources and autobiographical writings were also used. In the biographical study “Maria José Barbosa and her contribution to youth and adult education in Ceará (1995 to 2015),” by Aurinete Nogueira (2023), the author used the educator Maria José’s school documents, through which she was able to infer important aspects of Maria José Barbosa’s schooling. However, the primary source in that study was orality.

The recurring use of oral history is justified both by the type of study developed, the biographical one, and by the fact that many of the biographees are still alive or died recently, which makes it possible to produce oral sources. Based on this finding, it is important to bring into focus discussions about the substrate that composes oral history as a methodology, given its predominance in the analyzed works, since it involves various pitfalls and possibilities that were taken into account.

As is known, immaterial sources are those that are not tangible, because they do not have a physical medium, yet they are relevant for better understanding people’s history both individually and collectively. Various immaterial sources were mobilized in

the biographical research on women educators, because there were records of ceremonies or celebrations (birthday parties, “Doctor of the ABC,” prom, among others), religious rituals (first communion, weddings, Christmas celebrations), ways of living (with emphasis on family and educational organization), dance (such as the torem), regional expressions, myths, etc. However, oral history was highlighted in this text because of how predominantly it was used in PEMO’s research.

It was observed that, in order to give materiality to oral sources, there was always care to develop well-planned interviews, recording the location, the duration of the interview, and a description of the interviewee, as well as developing the record through audio recordings and transcriptions, preserved for posterity. The originality of the sources produced gained greater prominence through the critical and reflective gaze of the researchers, who took care to identify the producer’s intentions and to extract information about the past by interrelating nuances of individual life with the socio-historical and educational context at hand.

Oral history, the methodology adopted for handling oral accounts, did, however, require theoretical and methodological rigor so that researchers would not allow themselves to be led by the interviewee’s account, avoiding a heroic tone in the narrative. Biographical writings tended to resort to this methodology, mainly when a contemporary biographee was chosen, which compelled historians of education to draw on studies from the field of the History of the Present Time.

Bédarida (2006) defines the History of the Present Time as something unfinished, in constant movement, and calls attention to the fact that this temporal proximity and dynamic character make studies in the field even more difficult. “[...] A history in constant movement, reflecting the upheavals unfolding before us and therefore subject to endless renewal” (Bédarida, 2006, p. 229). This endless renewal of the History of the Present Time demands methodological maturity from the researcher.

Thus, recognizing that this temporal proximity between researchers and the memories elicited through oral history brings its own seductions, the studies showed care regarding the biographical illusion pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu (2006). For the author, those who propose to narrate their own life, establishing their own connections between events, create an artificial version of themselves.

Albuquerque Júnior (2007) also points to the dangers of this method, such as using orality as proof or as truth in itself, by highlighting the risks of identification between subject and object of the research.

Moreover, the identification between the subject and the object of research, in cases where oral history has often entailed a reification of interviewees' memories, has led to taking individuals' discourse not as a point of view on the real, but as an individual reality, a totality closed in on itself, rather than a singularity within a given discursive field (Albuquerque Júnior, 2007, p. 40).

In this way, the PEMO group's studies took care to treat memory as a substrate permeated by remembrance and forgetting, filtered by the narrator, who selects what will be oralized, and by the interviewer, in how they will analyze the accounts.

It was necessary to sharpen the biographers' attentive gaze, because when they set out to narrate a slice of a life, in order not to end up producing either a heroic or a literary work, they needed to come as close as possible to the truth and ensure the scientific rigor required for academic research. Understanding the mediations and the subtle, dialogical relations exercised with the object of study became fundamental for the researchers who ventured into writing history.

Moreover, it was important to observe the dialogical relationship between history and memory, repeatedly discussed in the studies, because they are distinct from each other, yet needed to be understood in the relationship that constitutes them. "Memory is, therefore, in relation to history, a way of selecting the past, an intellectual construction and not a flow external to thought" (Dosse, 2015, p. 289).

Finally, in choosing to use oral history in the biographies of women educators, the researchers needed to delve more deeply into the field of historiographical analyses and, unanimously, drew on the theoretical assumptions of the New Cultural History. These helped in discussing the history of education and women's history, as well as in using categories such as history, memory, culture, women's education, representation, school culture, among others, for which oral history was a highly relevant source of induction.

5 Final considerations

This study discussed the importance of (im)material sources in writing works about women educators, based on the methodological experience of the PEMO group. From the analysis of theses and dissertations produced by researchers in this group,

it was possible to identify the types of sources used in the biographical writing about women educators from Ceará and how they were handled.

In the works analyzed, the development of hermeneutic biographies is recurrent, grounded theoretically in cultural history and, methodologically, predominantly in oral history, in order to unveil nuances of formative processes, teaching practices, and women's contributions to the history of education. Moreover, these studies make it possible for the trajectories of women educators from Ceará and their practices to be known and discussed.

Writing the history of women required an expanded notion of sources, which only became possible after the theoretical discussions proposed by the third generation of the Annales School. From then on, there was a paradigm shift regarding the notion of subjects, objects, and problems in history, which enabled the theoretical grounding of the research carried out, in which classic authors such as Le Goff, Bloch, Burke, Dosse, among others, gained prominence alongside more contemporary authors such as Albuquerque Júnior, Portelli, Barros, Fialho, and others.

It was through this paradigm shift that women came to be seen as objects of history and their lives could become the focus of scientific research. However, in order to retell women's trajectories with a focus on the history of education, researchers ran up against a scarcity of sources, since women's traces were silenced in the official record of history, making the search for evidence more arduous.

Thus, for the writing of biographies of women educators, it was necessary for researchers to trace alternative paths, not restricting themselves only to official and material sources, but also using immaterial sources with an emphasis on orality. Indeed, private archives became fundamental to building the studies, since diaries, notes, invitations, photographs, and other sources were located there and proved relevant to the development of biographical research.

In the realm of sources, oral history stood out as a fundamental path for constructing most of the biographical research. However, oral accounts needed to be problematized in light of who produced them and the context of their production, since memory proved to be full of intentionalities. Methodological rigor and a responsible, critical-reflective engagement with sources help researchers avoid being seduced by the biographee's accounts, thus avoiding the biographical illusion pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu (2006).

Finally, the relevance of the reflections made possible through the biographical writing about women teachers is reiterated, since they are able to unveil aspects silenced in official narratives and to make women's protagonism in the educational landscape visible. Consequently, through the biographies of women educators, it is possible to record and preserve women's contributions to the history of education, including broadening historical understanding and enabling the elaboration of other historical narratives through new interpretations.

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