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The experience of coaches in MST agrarian reform lands in Sergipe: Sharing to achieve emancipation

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ABSTRACT:

The Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) gathers rural workers who intend to claim their social rights by promoting political and pedagogical education aiming at the construction of new human beings prepared to accomplish themselves in the collective. In order to understand MST coaches' praxis, particularly in the State of Sergipe, a survey has been conducted to collect information on the peculiarities of such an intervention. Drawing on these assumptions, this article aims to describe the teaching activity performed by these coaches, which is targeted to ensure access to social rights and simultaneously favour emancipation, as a consequence of daily social and cultural sharing among coaches and rural workers.

KEY WORDS:

Education, Teaching, Emancipation, MST.

INTRODUCTION

Human life has historically been marked by inequalities rooted in social relations. Fully aware of social and economic discrepancies, The Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) established the overcoming of social inequalities as its main battle flag. According to Stédile and Fernandes "(...) our fight is against three barriers: latifundium¹; ignorance and capital" (2000, p. 74). Therefore, MST brings rural workers together to gain access to the right of property over the land and (...) get the well-being they wish, those who dare do not fear danger, those who are forewarned do not reject pain" (La Boétie, 1982, p. 15).

MST relies on education to lead people to organize themselves to fight for land rights by developing humanistic values and reducing social disparities, since "(...) the democratisation of land creates the conditions for people to step out of poverty and for the elimination of social inequalities" (Stédile & Fernandes, 2000, p. 161). This way MST started a nationwide campaign for education with a view to ensure the right to education for all, and therefore "(...) enable people to get higher quality preparation in the political and technical knowledge required today within MST sphere of action" (Caldart, 1997, p. 38). For implementation of such an educational project the Movement established partnerships with some social institutions and particularly with Universities.

In Sergipe an educational partnership was established with the Federal University of Sergipe (UFS) through the Literacy Research Unit (NEPA) of the Department of Education where the author participated as a member of its pedagogic team. This educational project led to the alphabetisation of youths and adults living in agrarian reform areas and included education and training programmes targeted to coaches² working in settlements, which corresponded to elementary and

secondary education levels³. The author's participation as a teacher contributed to raise some questions, such as: how do coaches position themselves in relation to the Movement's philosophical and pedagogical principles? How deeply must they commit themselves to these principles to be able to put them into practice? What meanings do they attribute to their own teaching activity?

Having these questions as a starting point, our purpose here is to describe the way coaches act to make conquests viable, such as the access to social rights, while simultaneously addressing different and specific needs in juvenile and adult literacy classes. Therefore, we will start by explaining the relevance of education for MST, highlighting the peculiarities of coaches' teaching activity, as an expression of the role social interaction plays in the emancipation of student-workers and in a perspective of addressing rural people specificities.

EDUCATION IN MST

The Landless Rural Workers' Movement invests in the educational development of its coaches. MST relies on partnerships to ensure the workers' right to education at all levels (a right historically denied) as well as the professional development of its qualified staff in all its political, social, economic and affective dimensions. On the other hand, organizational capacity is also held to create opportunities to widen worldviews, to understand the value and usefulness of knowledge in the process of liberation, thus raising the hopes of those who dream of a better world.

Bearing these considerations in mind, we believe that MST pedagogical principles⁴ contribute to strengthen coaches' teaching activity⁵. On trying to meet the interests of student-workers through a process

of gradual awareness, coaches invite them to reflect on their activity, which leads to the adoption of new methodological strategies and to changes in the processes of organization and mobilization, always in tune with MST principles.

MST educational principles defend the emancipation of student-workers in a perspective of empowerment to face settlement problems. Besides, these principles are so rich in meanings that they invite us to go deeper in the understanding of MST pedagogical project. On guiding the teaching activity, the Movement ensures practice to keep targeted to the fight for more rights, such as health, education, housing, leisure, etc...

Therefore, teaching in settlements is mainly performed by coaches chosen by consensus in meetings and assemblies, on the basis of their capacity to teach in settlements and meet the interests of student-workers. It should be noticed that these coaching jobs are full of peculiarities. While facing the challenge to teach student-workers, coaches also live a number of other different roles, ranging from farmer to mass leader or family leader. As these roles are part of their daily routine they offer the opportunity to diversify coaches' pedagogical intervention according to the specificity of the different contexts where such roles are played. These features require not only personal relational qualities but also professional skills, which form MST coach profile. According to Bezerra Neto, a coach should

be faithful to the cause of the people; fight for the Agrarian Reform; understand the problems, analyse deeply and face challenges. (...) reject injustice; take on MST cause; love being an educator; love landless children; know everything about settlements; know what's going on; always say the truth; be hardworking. (...) know history; make history; deal with land issues; teach not to explore and not to be exploited. (...) teach the love of land and of fight; love MST. (...) learn a lot and teach all landless people how to read and write. (...) respect each one's uniqueness; not exclude; always teach something new to his/her pupils. (...) be a search leader; perspectivize education in the present and in the future; help the settlement to become productive; help to change the country; be democratic, liable and humble. Act as a citizen and teach how to be a citizen. (...) be in constant change and help others to change (Bezerra Neto, 1999, p. 70).

Therefore, coaches are expected to have the qualities that enable them to constantly recreate their own work conditions, to understand the specificities of a rural worker; to understand the diversity of values and worldviews and most of all to get the information they need to understand present conjuncture. Moreover, they are also supposed to assume a political position directed to the construction and strengthening of the

Movement by investing in education as a means to solve problems in Agrarian Reform lands.

Investing in coaches' education and training means to improve their qualifications and thus open up to new opportunities for the development of competences required by the pedagogical aims settled by the Movement. In evaluation studies on coach training, Andrade and Di Pierro reaffirm its relevance for settlements, since coach training can

prepare professionals with the qualifications and certifications required to respond to the features and challenges of the rural world and fit for the education of children living in rural settlements, from kindergarten to secondary education (...) allowing to overcome a historical deficit in rural environments, by enabling rural youth to access to higher education (Andrade & Di Pierro, 2004, p. 74).

This is only possible because the educational process devised by the Landless Movement is supposed to "urge MST members to take learning and the construction of a new project of society into their own hands" (MST 1994, p. 9). This process is also meant to overcome contradictions and explore mediations between different knowledge systems, which might enable rural workers to through down present barriers and thus create opportunities for human interaction in its multiple dimensions: exchange of experiences, ideas, opinions, interpersonal relations, valuing them according to the social role they play.

In this context, MST views education as a form of social intervention. According to Caldart (1997) "(...) it represents a citizenship right, an opportunity to reach certain types of knowledge which do make a difference in the educational development of people undergoing a process of social change and re-conquest of human dignity" by recovering social rights they had been denied before.

That is why MST outlined an educational project exclusively directed to settlements, since among all types of education only this one is held to meet their specific needs, the only one capable of freeing rural workers from their oppression and social exclusion ties in a context of emancipation, which is supposed to be "(...) shared so that they can achieve the freedom they need to build a new society" (MP-01)⁶.

Therefore, the educational processes should be dynamic, continuous and interactive and the teaching activity should follow a pedagogic trend based on reflection on educational provisions targeted to minorities, capable of offering them all the possibilities for personal development, that is, "(...) they are supposed to adopt methods where sharing experience might be used to fuel reflective processes about education and social reality" (Imbernón, 2004, p. 113).

This is the assumption that leads the Movement to devise educational provisions which can reinforce its social organization — MST coach education. Affiliated to the cause of the Agrarian Reform, these coaches are MST militants and believe in social transformation through education. According to Molina, this process implies going deeper into the ideas and theoretical reflections produced by a teaching activity aimed at human development, which means to think of

an educational provision aimed at human development where people improve different skills which enable them to question and reorganize knowledge and expertise; an educational provision which prepares people to pay attention to what is going on in the settlement and in the world (Molina, 2003, p. 128).

These achievements depend on coaches' commitment to provide opportunities for a transforming interventionist⁷ practice, capable of mediating dialogue, reflection and knowledge, aiming at preparing student-workers for their participation in the construction of a different subjectivity, thus leading to the transformation of social reality.

DESCRIBING THE TEACHING ACTIVITY

Individual and collective relations among all people involved in MST (based on beliefs, ideas and values) assume new meanings in their interaction with each other and with the organization and in the affective sharing of each other's life. Discipline, sharing, solidarity, love, art, values and attitudes, all of them are also present in the teaching activity, which strengthens the autonomy and development of the Movement through a deliberate effort of communication between different entities and different social partners. The classroom shelters everyone, provides freedom, happiness, education, training and pleasure of life, interacting in the process of individual and collective construction and evolution" (MP — 02).

In other words, coaches try to establish a tight relationship among all involved in the educational process, which favours the creation of opportunities for interaction where interpersonal relations might acquire new meanings before the diversity of values present in the daily routine of a settlement⁸. All their effort is centred in multiplying educational opportunities where student-workers can find sustainable tools to proceed with their plans "(...) to prepare human beings capable of thinking, criticizing, analysing and speaking of reality. The only thing that matters is everyone's participation in the process of helping the settlement to change" (MP — 03). Social organization in a settlement is very complex and marked by the singularity of heterogeneous individuals

in ethnic, social, cultural, ethical, economic and affective terms.

When teaching, coaches in charge of the educational process assume an attitude of concern towards the achievement of significant results and the implementation of aims and goals rooted in MST philosophical, political and social principles. According to La Torre (1993, p. 58), teaching "(...) is interchanging, sharing, confronting, debating ideas and through these activities individuals can transcend their own previously acquired knowledge". In this sense, these teaching activities correspond to social practice when dealing with human interaction of values, attitudes, beliefs, symbols and power. As stated by Veiga (2004, p.16), teaching as a social practice "(...) is a complex professional activity that requires teacher preparation, commitment and responsibility so that they can provide students with the tools that enable them to become social subjects".

As regards affectivity, these relationships are based on "emotions, affections, fears, joys and blockades" (Tardif, 2002, p. 130). Though present in the settlement, in the classroom these relationships are particularly strengthened by beliefs and mystic feelings. According to Jesus, mysticism⁹ operates

as one of the most important tools for the development of values and symbols. It is a ritual that occurs at the beginning or at the end of any activity and among others it conveys messages of solidarity, desire to win, denouncing exploitation, justice and love (Jesus, 2003, pp. 232-233).

Mysticism is understood as "(...) the need to organize and better prepare the places for nation-wide meetings and wider meetings, and think of different opening and closing sessions" (Bogo, 2003, p 308) for MST activities. It also represents a reference to define the beautiful and the feelings expressed by human beings in a process of organization through action. Coaches base their teaching activity on practical knowledge emerging from daily life in the settlement in a perspective of critical intervention into reality. The utmost challenge is to find out how to reinvest those experiences into the teaching activity to enrich praxis¹⁰.

Moreover, coaches are inspired by their emotions, wisdom, and lifelong learning. According to Gauthier (1998), the knowledge required for a typical pedagogical work is a basic condition for the creation of opportunities leading to the development of other competences, such as those due to an "idealizer, socio-political transformer of society". In other words, they must be able to re-conceptualise all fragmentary information received from a wider socio-cultural context and show the relationships, mediations, historical moment, and social conditions in dialogic relationship. However, coaches' experience and forms of organization should not be

depreciated since they ground further reflections on new forms of knowledge to be proposed to the settlement. Coaches are responsible for the process of intervention, reconstruction and mediation, with the possibility to embrace the cause of the Agrarian Reform, which they do by implementing methodological strategies leading to the permanent re-elaboration of their teaching project.

Therefore, coaches' teaching activity is very demanding, much beyond the repetition of what has been seen or heard, as the following statement proves: "(...) I used to take the problem defined by settlement members as a basis, then I'd prepare a lesson to use debate assuring any form of writing (drawing), asking them to speak about the sense they attributed to the written material, without correcting them" (MP — 04).

In this sense, knowledge is built and rebuilt by doing and by investing their feelings and values, which in turn gets strengthened through feedback on their performance. Therefore, new knowledge leads to the re-organization, re-interpretation, re-signification, re-consideration of reality, to a new knowledge synthesis.

From a praxis perspective, coaches' activity has as its *sine qua non* condition the implementation of an educational process centred in an ethically, politically and socially conscious project. The following statements allow us to identify the senses that favour a teaching practice connected to the daily life of settlement members:

Working on their life stories, experience, knowledge and transforming them into classroom contents related to subjects like History, Portuguese, Mathematics, Geography and Science. Using their experience to enhance learning. Experiencing in practice (...) having settlement members' life as a starting point — everyday life (MP — 03).

Classroom lessons are pleasant talks about their lives, productivity calculation and culture. In a process of experience sharing (...) students bring their problems and victories into classroom (MP — 05).

Taking information to fuel permanent conversations, such as agriculture, political conjuncture and production issues — all of them are proficient in this competence (MP — 06).

These testimonies show the relevance of daily interaction, expression of feelings and meanings and respect for the possibility to re-organize knowledge so that all

involved in the educational process can individually and collectively build their autonomy in a social organization. This "(...) helps in the process of autonomy and in the search for alternatives to solve settlement problems" (MP — 07).

This process depends on decisions taken by the coaches when they understand reality and when relations are funded on dialogues among settlement members, on knowledge sharing and on the construction of a way to follow which also penetrates other knowledge fields that can be described and interpreted by all, since "(...) seduction happens when there is a way to follow and motivation to learn (...). This is where the taste and joy of learning is discovered" (MST, 1994, p. 10). This is how coaches cement the organization of social reality, inciting settlement members to assume the responsibility to act in a way to explore the educational process and understand how it materializes into social practice.

TO SUM UP

An analysis to the teaching activity (which is a collective cultural production) carried out in Agrarian Reform lands (in an emancipatory perspective) shows the importance of education as one of the indispensable dimensions leading settlement members to citizenship. On the other hand, it also unveils the wish to overcome contradictions emerging from present inequality.

It is now worth highlighting the need for coaches to get politically involved so that they can develop

critical thinking in a way to favour the emergence of stronger intelligences willing to carry out the historical construction of human beings responsible for what they do of themselves in a wider context of freedom and dignity (Galeffi, 2001, p. 36).

Therefore, we believe MST gets stronger as it increases educational opportunities in settlement areas, since this is the way MST can profit from all the potential and capacities of these coaches' teaching activity. At stake is a collective learning environment, where teaching and learning alternatives are produced in a dialogical reflective process and where education is viewed as one of the most important pathways to emancipation and to ensure greater access to social rights, which is made possible through a process of experience sharing and reflection on action.

ENDNOTES

1. In this context, Ianni (1981, p. 90) understands latifundium “(...) as the rural setting where work is only formally — but not actually — subordinated to capital. Moreover, a latifundium frequently combines different kinds of workers and social organizations”.

2. The word coach is used to name teachers charged with the education of people living in settlements in Agrarian Reform lands.

3. From 2001 to 2003, the Popular Educator Training Project has been implemented in mainstream education at secondary education level and in Agrarian Reform areas in connection with the National Program for Education in Agrarian Reform — PRONERA, through a partnership with the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA); Landless Rural Workers’ Movement (MST); Federation of Agricultural Workers of the State of Sergipe (FETASE); Research and Support Foundation of the State of Sergipe (FAPESE); Secretary of Education and Sports (SEED) and Federal University of Sergipe (UFS), Pro-Rectorship of Extension and Community Matters (PROEX), Department of Education (DED), and Literacy Research Unit (NEPA). At stake is an extension educational project targeted to coaches/literacy instructors, with the main aim to improve coaches’ teaching skills, thus broadening their knowledge and competence to act in Agrarian reform areas. This project involved the participation of teachers from the Departments of Education, Social Service, Psychology, Philosophy, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Geography, History, as well as teachers from the private school where the project was implemented and State Network teachers.

4. These are MST pedagogical principles: “(...) close relation between practice and theory; methodological combination between education and training processes; having reality as the basis for knowledge production; socially useful educational contents; education for work and through work; organic connection between educational and political processes; organic connection between educational and economic processes; organic connection between education and culture; democratic management; self-organization of students; creation of pedagogic collectives and permanent education of teaching staff; research skills and attitude; combination between collective and individual pedagogic processes” (MST, 1996, p. 23).

5. The teaching activity should be understood as a pedagogic process developed in teachers’ professional practice. It comes from the Latin verb *docere*, which means “teach, instruct, show, point out, suggest” (Houaiss Dictionary); it means the act of teaching, teaching performance and teacher quality.

6. The abbreviation MP — 01, 02, 03... is used to protect the identity of coaches interviewed during the research process.

7. Intervention is used here in the sense of the daily activity carried out in a settlement, where all members do what is necessary to keep the settlement organized, such as litter collection and reforestation, as explained in the testimonies selected in this article. To a certain extent intervention is also linked to the ideas of mobility, mobilization, integration, wish to change, perception of needs, motivations of people in their daily life.

8. We agree with Kosik, when he defines daily life “(...) as a world in whose regular rhythm a human being moves with mechanic instinctiveness and a feeling of familiarity” (1986, p. 76).

9. Bogo calls our attention to the meaning of mysticism, since there are misunderstandings rooted in its Greek origin, where the word was linked to the idea of mystery (*mustérion*), and hence to the ecclesiastic Latin word *mysterium*, which has been adopted by the catholic religion during the Christian history and hence by the idealist philosophy” (2003, p. 309). For a deeper reflection on the meaning of mysticism for MST, I recommend the books: *O vigor da mística* (2002) e *Arquitetos de Sonhos* (2003), both by Ademar Bogo.

10. Praxis is “(...) practice in need of reflection, self-questioning and theory to get strengthened in a consequent way; and theory referred to practice facing the challenge to evaluate what is right or wrong and confronting it with practice” (Konder, 1992, p. 115).

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