

Executive Summary

How Do New Critical Pedagogies Develop? Public Education, Social Change, and Landless Workers in Brazil

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How do new pedagogical approaches toward public schooling develop? Why do teachers begin to embrace these alternative educational practices? And what relationship, if any, do new pedagogies have to alternative social and political visions? In this article, I argue that educational reform is not always a top-down process, implemented by educational officials and politicians in far-off bureaucratic offices; social movements can themselves become protagonists in the development, implementation, and oversight of new pedagogical practices. In the 1980s, peasant-activists from the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST) began developing an innovative approach to rural schooling, and in the 1990s, these activists began to train public school teachers to implement these pedagogical ideas. This analysis illustrates that social movements not only are capable of demanding access to public education for marginalized populations, but also are well positioned to develop new pedagogies for these schools. However, pedagogies promoted by social movements are often explicitly connected to proposals for broader social and political change, raising questions about the appropriate role for public schooling in societal transformation.

BACKGROUND: THE MST AND EDUCATION

The MST is a social movement of peasant-activists that has been fighting for agrarian reform—the redistribution of land and the means to produce food on those lands—for over 30 years. Once land is redistributed to landless families, MST activists encourage these families to organize their communities based on shared landownership, collective agricultural production, and cooperative social practices. In the early 1980s, MST activists sought to counteract the influences of the public school system by organizing informal educational activities (known as popular education) in their communities. However, the MST soon began to realize the importance of participation in the public school system and started developing new pedagogies for the schools in their communities. By the late 1990s, the MST's educational approach to rural schooling, known as *Educação do Campo* (Education of the Countryside), had become a nationally recognized approach to rural schooling. I analyze this transition within the MST, from a movement of popular educators to a movement of public school teachers, while also exploring how the MST's pedagogical approach was constructed through a dialectical interaction between theory and practice.

FROM POPULAR EDUCATION TO PUBLIC SCHOOLING

Ever since the MST's emergence in the early 1980s, activists have been offering popular educational classes for children and adults in their movement, based in the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's pedagogical ideas. However, in order for Freire's ideas to resonate with these MST activists, the activists needed to experience the theories in practice. The Catholic Church became a vehicle for this praxis.

In 1987 the MST began to shift its educational focus from popular education to the public school sphere. This was not a top-down decision made by the MST leadership, but rather an issue pushed to the forefront of the movement by families living in MST settlements, in response to the everyday reality of a public school system that devalued their history and struggle.

In contrast to other movements, the MST is a *socio-territorial* movement—not only making demands on the state but also attempting to transform entire geographical “spaces” and make them their own “territories.” Activists describe themselves as “socialists,” struggling for more collective forms of agricultural production, the creation of viable food cooperatives, the establishment of community-owned land, and the promotion of shared work processes. Thus, by the late 1980s activists realized that the traditional approach to rural schooling was threatening their movement’s ability to form new social relations in their territories that supported alternative modes of economic production.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: DEVELOPING PEDAGOGIES FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Once transforming public schools became a central part of the MST’s political struggle, the movement had to develop its own pedagogies. The MST built on its previous experiences with popular education, while also searching out educational theories that would support its socialist vision. The three most important foundations of the MST’s educational approach: Paulo Freire, Soviet pedagogues, and peasant cultural practices. These pedagogies were not outside theories that were imposed on the movement, but rather educational ideas that resonated with ideals and values already prominent in MST communities.

DEVELOPING EDUCATIONAL UTOPIAS

In the early 1990s, the movement began to develop teacher-training programs to help incorporate these pedagogical ideas into the public school system. For the MST, teacher training is not simply about being effective in the classroom; it is also about developing a collective of teacher-activists in the schools dedicated to supporting the movement. The MST activists who graduated from these programs, and became teachers and principals in public schools in their communities, demonstrate the important role these programs played in both activists’ understanding of the movements’ educational approach and their political consciousness.

In 1995, MST activists founded their first “movement” high school, the Institute of Education Josué de Castro (IEJC). Although the majority of youth in MST settlements and camps still access secondary education through the traditional public school system, the establishment of IEJC has given the MST an opportunity to solidify its pedagogical approach, and its unique mixture of Freirean, Soviet, and organic cultural practices, in a space where activists have a lot of control over the educational process. Most innovative is IEJC’s governance structure, a participatory democracy that allows students to be involved in every aspect of the school’s decision-making process. For the MST, the IEJC is an educational utopia—an ideal educational setting that may never be realized in the public schools, but that gives activists something tangible that they can strive for. More than 3,000 students have received high school degrees from IEJC in the last 15 years.

CRITIQUES, CONTRADICTIONS, AND CONCERNS

Although the MST's pedagogy is widely embraced in Brazil as a new educational approach to rural schooling, the movement's participation in public schools is also frequently critiqued as too "political": Activists who participate in the public schools are part of a social movement that is advocating for a particular pedagogical approach to rural schooling that adheres to their collective vision of how society should function. Drawing on Freire, activists support their participation in the public school system by arguing that no educational system is neutral. Rather, schools are always either actively maintaining or changing the status quo, and the MST demands the latter option.

Nonetheless, even within these agrarian reform settlements, not all community members agree with the MST's right to use public schools to advance the movement's political and economic struggle. This raises the question of how the MST leadership deals with the dissenting views of students' in MST educational program. Although activists embrace critical thinking and student self-governance, there are several aspects of the movement's pedagogical approach that are not up for negotiation. For example, the collective orientation of these programs, the political formation, and the self-discipline of the students are required components of all MST educational initiatives. If students refuse to participate in these aspects of a course, they are not allowed to continue in the certification program. This suggests that "critical pedagogy" does not necessarily encompass the right of students to completely dissent from the basic principles of a particular educational process.

CONCLUSIONS

Do social movements have the right to participate in defining the goals of the public education? The article concludes by arguing that while social movements should not be allowed to unilaterally implement their political vision in schools and on behalf of communities, if activists are able to convince parents, teachers, students, administrators, and bureaucrats of the value of their educational approach, then their participation in educational innovation is legitimate.