

DOSSIER

Childhood(s), social movements and the city: curriculum(s) and teacher training

Challenges imposed on the work with Landless children in the context of Early Childhood Education in the countryside***Desafios impostos ao trabalho com as crianças Sem Terrinha no contexto da Educação Infantil do Campo***

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ABSTRACT

By understanding the importance of highlighting the theme of childhood, social movements, curriculum and training, this article, based on Paulo Freire and Mikhail Bakhtin, intends to focus on the challenges imposed on the work of children educators who work with children in Rural Early Childhood Education (EIC) in Agrarian Reform settlements. Among the data from the doctoral research, for this article we have selected narratives from a semi-structured interview with two educators who work in EIC. Data shows that the educators understand the importance of the work they do with the children, but they emphasize the challenges and structural precariousness of the conditions in which this work is carried out, such as the lack of support and teaching materials. They also point to the lack of training on the part of the municipalities, which ends up being the responsibility of the social movement. The article is part of the EIC agenda and calls for research, studies and coordination with public institutions in order to make the countryside and its people visible, especially the rights of children to appropriate spaces in their communities, in the territories they inhabit.

Keywords: Landless Children. Early Childhood Education In The Countryside. Teacher Training.

RESUMO

Por compreender a importância de visibilizar a temática acerca das infâncias, movimentos sociais, currículo e formação, o artigo, alicerçado em Paulo Freire e Mikhail Bakhtin, tem como objetivo focalizar os desafios impostos ao trabalho de educadoras infantis que atuam com as crianças na Educação Infantil do Campo (EIC), em assentamentos de Reforma Agrária. Dentre os dados que integram a pesquisa de doutorado, para este artigo, selecionamos narrativas oriundas de entrevista semiestruturada, realizada com duas educadoras que atuam na EIC. Com os dados, demonstramos que as educadoras compreendem a importância do trabalho que realizam com as crianças, mas evidenciam os desafios e as precariedades estruturais acerca das condições em que este trabalho é realizado, como a falta de apoio e materiais pedagógicos. Evidenciam também a falta de formação continuada por parte dos municípios, ficando sob a responsabilidade do movimento social. O artigo se insere na pauta da EIC e conclama pesquisas, estudos e articulações junto aos órgãos públicos, a

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fim de visibilizar o campo e sua gente, sobretudo os direitos das crianças aos espaços apropriados em suas comunidades, nos territórios que habitam.

Palavras-chave: Crianças Sem Terrinha. Educação infantil do campo. Formação de Professores.

Introduction

Through a discussion of childhood, social movements, curriculum and teacher training, and with an understanding of the importance and need to make visible the actions that lead the countryside and its people, especially in the context of struggles for the right to land, housing, health and education (Santos *et al.* 2014), this article seeks to focus on the challenges posed by the work of child educators who work with children in settlements of the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) in the state of Espírito Santo, 2020), this article seeks to focus on the challenges of the work of child educators who work with children in the settlements of the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) in the state of Espírito Santo (ES), the focus of our study, as well as the demands for training related to the work they do with this public in this territory.

This proposal is part of the narrative doctoral research in which, based on the testimonies of the graduates of the courses of rural teaching and pedagogy, held in partnership with the Federal University of Espírito Santo (Ufes), we sought to understand the teaching training trajectories of the subjects involved in this training process. From the material resulting from the research (documentary survey, online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and writing pedagogical letters to the MST), for this article we present the data related to the semi-structured interview we conducted with two educators who work with children in early childhood education in the countryside (EIC), in MST settlements.

It is important to note that the State of Espírito Santo, in the course of 39 years of struggle, has brought together landless families in search of better living conditions in the countryside. At present, the MST is present in 25 municipalities of Espírito Santo, with 65 settlements and about 2,800 settled families.

There are 10 organized camps with 1,235 families fighting for a piece of land. Thus, in its history of struggles for land and education, we remember the first articulations, the result of the 1st National Seminar on Education in Settlements, held in this State, in the municipality of São Mateus, in 1987. This meeting consolidated the national base of the educational sector of the MST.

Since then, the education sector has been fighting to guarantee spaces that meet the specific needs of people living in rural areas, as well as partnerships with organizations and public institutions, such as universities, in an effort to guarantee access to training that meets the needs of rural areas (Vieira, 2023).

In this context, we would like to point out that, although it is not possible within the limits of this article to carry out a literature review on the challenges of the work of educators who work in settlements, we would like to highlight some studies that focus on education in the countryside and social movements, with the aim of recognizing the research and researchers who focus on the

countryside and its subjects, making the issue of childhood visible in the context of MST. In this broader discussion that covers the countryside, we focus on the production of knowledge on the subject (Souza, 2016), listing the pedagogical practices of MST (Souza, 2006), with a focus on the National Program for Education in Agrarian Reform - PRONERA (Moreira; Lima, 2016).

With regard to EIC, we list the national study characterization of educational practices with children aged 0 to 6 living in rural areas (Barbosa *et al.*, 2012), which helps us to map the conditions in which care is provided in all regions of the country, as well as the study that focuses on academic production on rural education in the countryside and the historical paths of early childhood education in this context (Vieira; Côco, 2016).

With Conde and Costa (2019), we deepen our reflections on the contributions of socialist pedagogy to the MST's conception of early childhood education; and with Ramos and Aquino (2019), who discuss children in the context of the land struggle in Brazil, we understand how children are mobilized in the context of the movement. We incorporate studies that are part of the *cirandas* of children of the MST (Rossetto, 2009; Luedke, 2013), with a focus on the education of popular children (Freitas, 2015) and the education of children in the countryside (Arenhart, 2005; Bihain, 2001; Méliga, 2014). We consider these studies to be fundamental to the discussions in which we participate, although there are certainly many others.

In relation to the training of educators working in rural areas, we have the study by Côco (2011), which discusses early childhood education in rural areas from a perspective closer to the scenario in Espírito Santo; rural education and childhood, with an approach to experiences in different rural contexts (Foerste *et al.*, 2015); the teaching work of teachers in settlements (Martins, 2012) and in contexts in Para, Amazon (Hage; Feldmann, 2015); pedagogical practices that focus on childhood, the university and the MST (Bahia; Felipe; Pimentel, 2005); a study on the curriculum of early childhood education in rural areas (Santos, 2016) and highlighting reflections on care in agrarian reform settlements (Vieira; Côco, 2019).

These are studies that we have listed (and we don't ignore many others) that allow us to highlight the achievements and challenges that are part of the nuances that permeate the pedagogical work with children without land. Studies that, in our opinion, should be part of the debate to highlight issues that are sometimes silenced in the context of public policies, such as early childhood education in the countryside and the training of educators who work with children in rural areas, especially in agrarian reform settlements.

In this sense, the article is divided into four parts, the first of which is the introduction. In the second part, we discuss the right of the children of Sem Terra to EIC; then, in the third part, we try to narrate the challenges of the work of two child educators who work with children in MST settlements and their training requirements; finally, we present some reflections that place us in the continuity of the conversation with the countryside, with the children, with the educators, with the social movements, and with the research that has focused on the peasant territory.

Rural early childhood education: the right of Landless Children

It is important to note that in the context of rural education, children were not visible in policy or educational research, and only became more prominent in the 1990s (Vieira; Côco, 2016), a period in which mobilizations around the education of the subjects who inhabit this territory began to be highlighted. In this trajectory, EIC, a recent theme that materialized from peasant struggles, debates, field education (Caldart, 2012) and early childhood education (Rosemberg, 1999), supports the specificity of the children who inhabit this space (Silva; Pasuch, 2010).

Research on EIC (Barbosa *et al.*, 2012; Gonçalves, 2013; Silva; Silva; Martins, 2013) has shown the need to focus on children living in rural areas, who are potential targets of public education policies. In this context, we refer to the children of family farmers, extractive workers, artisanal fishers, river dwellers, agrarian reform settlers and *campesinos*, *quilombolas*, *caiçaras*, water and forest peoples. We therefore argue that policies for children should also address these specific needs. With regard to the issue highlighted here, we will focus on the challenges faced by two early childhood educators in their work with children in agrarian reform settlements and the training requirements they believe are necessary to improve care at this stage of basic education.

Hence, when we focus on the children of Sem Terrinha, we emphasize the fact that they are present in the land occupations, the marches, the mobilizations in public spaces, and in the internal activities of the movement. In other words, they are part of the MST and, together with their families, they build their Sem Terrinha identity. In this theme, “[...] the Sem Terrinha identity is worked from different matrices of knowledge and also from the dynamics of social life” (Barros, 2013, p. 125). These are children who are not isolated from society. They experience social contradictions on a daily basis and learn from an early age to fight for their rights.

An example of this tireless struggle are the Sem Terrinha meetings, which usually take place in the month around Children’s Month. These meetings are not only festive and commemorative, but also spaces to demand children’s rights to land, food, education, leisure, health and appropriate spaces in their communities, such as schools.

In 2018, the First National Meeting of Landless Children was held in Brasília. And, as part of the National Day organized by the MST with the children and with the slogan “Sem Terrinha in Struggle: Towards 40 Years” (do MST, on October 9, 2023, the XI State Meeting of Landless Children was held in the state of Espírito Santo. Approximately 500 children occupied the spaces of the University with their songs and slogans and presented their demands to the authorities of the capital, as well as participating in various recreational workshops. These are spaces for leisure and training that show children, adults, public authorities and society that they exist, in order to (re)understand their demands.

In the public hearing at the end of the meeting, we participated in the reading of the Letter of the Landless Children to the *capixabas*, in which they presented to the authorities the demands arising from the spaces and times they experience in their territories. In the letter, they express the importance of the schools in the settlements, the fruit of their families’ struggle and perseverance; they commit themselves to continue fighting against the closure of the schools; they ask for better

infrastructure conditions, access to water, sanitation, roads, playgrounds, libraries, quality food; and they end the letter with the commitment to continue fighting for a school, a state and a country that is fair and equal for all people (MST, 2023a).

Among their demands is the right to education, based on access to schools, but not just any school. In this agenda, “[...] we see that instead of valuing and promoting education in the countryside, the closure of schools in rural communities has often prevailed” (Pasuch; Santos, 2012, p. 127). Thus, the defense of an EIC that serves children without land is based on the right, “[...] on the otherness of rural children [...]” (Ramos, 2021, p. 108).

In order to work with this specificity of the EIC, the MST has sought partnerships with universities in order to develop training processes that, together with the people who work and/or will work in rural areas, can contribute to an education that meets the needs of the rural population. We understand that educators who work with children in a rural school must cover the spaces and times of this place, such as territorials, environmental, economic, political and social conflicts. They must start from the specificity of the territory and of the children who inhabit it, in order to expand proposals that put people at the center and forge an education based on people, not in their name.

In this direction, our studies have focused on the training of educators in the context of social movements (Vieira; Côco, 2017, 2018), drawing attention to the responsibility of public authorities for training. In the context of Espírito Santo, the continuous training of educators working in the settlements is the responsibility of the social movement (Vieira, 2016).

The 35th State Meeting of Agrarian Reform Educators, held in June 2023, with the slogan “MST towards 40 years: strengthening our pedagogy in the art of struggle”, addressed emerging issues in Espírito Santo (MST, 2023b). This meeting, organized by the Education Sector of the MST, made it possible to articulate by areas of knowledge, thus materializing the second meeting of EIC educators working in the Movement’s settlements. It was a space for dialogue, for sharing experiences, for discussing the difficulties, the beauties and, above all, the need to continue meeting by area in order to strengthen the EIC.

With this in mind, we sought to highlight, through the narratives of two educators who work with these children in MST settlements, the challenges they face in working with the children, as well as the training requirements, data that will be explored in the following topic.

EIC in MST settlements: the challenges of working with children

When we refer to the context of agrarian reform settlements, we enter a territory of struggles for rights, access and permanence, both in the territory and in the educational institutions. The spaces that serve children in the EIC are sometimes provided by the community, rooms attached to public schools, or even improvised spaces. Research has shown that “[...] poorer children from rural areas [...] tend to attend early childhood education institutions of lower quality than non-poor children from urban areas” (Rosemberg; Artes, 2012, p. 19). This reality is evident in França’s narrative, where she emphasizes,

Unfortunately, in the [name of community] education department, at least for the first six years of kindergarten, we had nothing. What was there when the class was created, with a lot of struggle, also with a lot of pressure to work before [it was created], were some chairs that nobody used anymore. Very old, damaged chairs [...] since then there hasn't been much. What we had was what we bought. We had a mimeograph that I remember, that's all! There was never a stereo. I bought the stereo. There was always a lack of paper to mimeograph some of the activities we created [...] (França, interview, February, 2022).

In addition to the struggle to create a class to attend to the children, the teacher recounts the various demands for basic items. In this direction, the study of Leal and Ramos (2012, p. 162) shows that

[...] the physical structure of an early childhood education center should not be thought of as something that only concerns the construction or reformulation of a physical space [...] the cultural specificities linked, for example, to the ways of life of the different areas of the Brazilian countryside must be taken into account.

We believe that taking into account the links with the territories is essential for a healthy, quality environment. An environment that considers cultural and social issues as fundamental to work with children. In the territories of the MST, these issues materialize in the effective participation of the children in the celebrations of the settlement, in the commemoration of the anniversary of the conquest of the land, in the actions coordinated by the children, such as the organization of children's assemblies, the preparation and participation in the meetings of the children of Sem Terrinha, among the various activities of the Movement in which they are present and participate on a daily basis. These are topics that should underpin the curriculum of educational institutions, which are sometimes controversial (Arroyo, 2013) because they represent the reality of the peasant territory. In this context, we envision a "[...] school [and community] that becomes a space where children, whether they are from the working class or not, are able to learn and create, to take risks, to ask questions, to grow" (Freire, 2001, p. 42).

Considering work with children in institutions means addressing issues such as the lack of teaching materials, which has a direct impact on the work. Ferreira reports that

[...] [Toys and books] came to the city, and they didn't come here. And we knew things would come. For example, toys, there are two slides here. We only saw them in other schools. Our children didn't have any. So because of this pressure, because of this organization that we have, we started to think about it, to see it, but not spontaneously from the government itself. So now, during the pandemic, we didn't have a computer or anything. Now, finally, there have been some demands [...] the committee is always trying to have a representative of each organization, so they're always looking for dialogue, but it's very difficult [...] they take the demands of the schools. The last request was for computers. The other schools have computers, but these two CEIMs don't have them, they haven't arrived (Ferreira, interview, November, 2021).

A closer look at this narrative reveals an articulation that helps to demand from those in charge of public spaces the improvements that should reach rural institutions. The educator points out that achievements in the city are not always achievements for rural schools. She highlights the work of the Rural Education Committee in the collective articulations around the demands presented

to the municipal managers. In addition to the lack of infrastructure to serve the children, there is also a lack of material to support the pedagogical work of the teachers. This is a constant theme in the MST when they ask: “What collective spaces do we have for children in our community? If we do what can, we improve so that children of all ages can enjoy them, and if we don’t, what can we do?” (MST, 2011, p. 27). And we continue: “What are the working conditions for educators who work with this age group in agrarian reform settlements?”

When asked what she would like to ask of her community, França is emphatic:

[...] I think it improves the structure. And the main one is a **playroom** with creative **educational games, books, toys**. Because children have a right. A **decent playground**, so that the children also have space for leisure. We take a ball, there’s a rope, they play hopscotch, [...] they swing in the trees, there are a lot of trees near the school, they love it. There’s an old government building, and we use the kitchen in that building, the office in that building, and another room that we use as a **canteen**. But it’s not very close for the children to go when it rains; it’s not far, but it’s in the way. When it rains, the children get wet going to the other side [...]. We asked the town hall to build a **room** [...] and then all we had to do was cover two walls and put a roof over it. Do you know how many years it’s been since they promised to do it? ten years! and every meeting we ask for it [...] and they’ve never done it. (França, interview, February 2022, authors’ marks).

What we see is that if we compare the simplest institution in the city, it has better structural conditions than an institution in the countryside. Therefore, it is important to note that, for us, “[...] settlement childhood is not defined by its opposition to other childhoods, especially urban ones, but by its coexistence, combining social relations of different historical origins” (Felipe, 2013, p. 26), which must be taken into account in educational policies.

Regarding the issues that resonate with the land and its subjects, we reflect with Freire (2004, p. 68) that “[...] it is not possible for the school, if it is really committed to the formation of educators, to be detached from the social, cultural and economic conditions of its students, their families, their neighbors [their community]” and, above all, from the structural conditions that guarantee quality access to education. We also agree with Freire (2001, p. 38) that “[...] you can’t think about changing the face of the school, you can’t think about helping the school to become serious, rigorous, competent and joyful without thinking about the ongoing training of the educator”.

With regard to her work with the children, Ferreira underscores in her narrative that, for her, the community should

[...] to continue to guarantee autonomy, [...] so that we can continue to work on our proposal for rural education. I think that’s one of the essential, important things for us, because it’s better to work like this than to fight all the time; because it’s a burden for those who are in the schools. The other thing is to guarantee, I think, that [...] if we work knowing that the children are respected, in the sense that their rights are guaranteed, I think the work develops better. [...] Whoever is in the school does a lot of tidying up to make sure it goes on, mending here and sewing there. That gets in the way of teaching [...] (Ferreira, interview, November, 2021).

This respect and autonomy tells us how each community understands, understands, and dialogues with rural education, with the needs of children, educators, and the community.

Sometimes, “[...] this being, which involves your permanent relationship with the world, also involves your action on it” (Freire, 2013, p. 46). This is understood by those who have a relationship with the countryside or who recognize the importance of an education that takes into account the people, their knowledge, their territories and their rights.

If the people who work in education, in the management of public spaces and policies, are not aware of this specificity, the work becomes more difficult, because it is up to the rural people to fight for the guarantee of this right, which is not always respected, because it is not always understood. We need people who are part of the EIC agenda, who are committed to the children, to the territory and to the social movement to which they belong. We need to fight, organize and mobilize in order to guarantee quality childcare spaces in early childhood education (Brasil, 2006; 2009). This analysis is highlighted in França’s narrative, in which, for her.

Even with so many opinions, so many laws that support us, the Ministry of Education is not interested in whether the countryside has its specifics or not, they don’t. And so it’s a struggle, and we, as the Municipal and State Committee, have to strengthen this struggle and demand that the mayor take action, because we can’t even talk to the mayor. He doesn’t meet with us [...] the Secretary of Education does, but she doesn’t have the autonomy to decide (França, interview, February, 2022).

The data shows, based on the narratives, that when there is a rural education committee organized in the municipalities and states, the agendas resonate with a chorus that reaches those who have the power to make decisions. This strengthening of the committees is fundamental for the articulations around the defense of rural education, in which “[...] each word presents itself as a miniature arena where social values of contradictory orientation intersect and struggle [...] it reveals itself, at the moment of its expression, as the product of the living interaction of social forces” (Bakhtin, 2014, p. 67). Hence, it is necessary to say it, it is necessary to put it on the agenda, so that the demand is not forgotten.

The lack of pedagogical support is one of the ways in which the EIC is run in some communities. In the room attached to the public school where she works with the children in the EIC, Ferreira demonstrates how this monitoring is done, which, according to the narrative below, amounts to one visit per week.

The educator comes once a week. He supervises a lot of schools [...]. For example, on the day I plan, he can’t be here with me, [...] there’s no time for us to sit down, it’s like this [and shows the phone], you know? So there’s no time! And I don’t think it can be like that in rural education. I think it has to be collective planning [...]. I’m telling you that it’s gotten better, because before there was nothing, there was no pedagogue (Ferreira, interview, November, 2021).

The discontinuities with each municipal administration also confirm the discontinuities in the agendas and approaches to the demands. The mayor changes, the policy changes. With the understanding that “[...] there is neither the first nor the last word, and there are no limits to the dialogical context” (Bakhtin, 2011, p. 410), we want to raise the issue of children, their contexts, their rights, in order to give visibility to rural childhood, together with the municipal administrations, with the support of social movements.

We call for initiatives (actions, studies, researches, etc.) that address the specificity of this group of children, in order to mobilize services that can favor the care of children in qualified spaces, the pedagogical work carried out, as well as the training of educators. There are many challenges and we still have a long way to go to ensure that children from rural areas are highlighted, made visible and, above all, remembered in public policies.

Conclusions

It is with the possibility of dialoguing on a subject so dear to us, with issues that concern childhood, social movements, curriculum and teacher training, that we have sought to develop this article. We are going through a period of dismantling of social and educational policies in Brazil (Molina; Santos; Brito, 2020), and we understand that we must continue to fight against any setback, with the commitment to make the countryside and its children visible.

We reaffirm our commitment to the countryside and its people, in defense of access to land, to the goods of nature, to education as a right of all people and not of a minority. Thus, the narratives of the educators who work with the children of Sem Terrinha in the context of the EIC help us to understand the need to manage this territory. Sometimes it's not enough to have services in the countryside. It is necessary to meet the specific needs of the children of the land, the water and the forest. Educators who work with this stage of basic education need to understand the nuances that inhabit this space, understand the struggles of the place, the contradictions that emerge daily and reach the floor of the educational institutions. Therefore, they must be guaranteed the right to training as a means of qualifying their work.

In the context of the struggle for the training of educators, we highlight the links that exist in the State of Espírito Santo with public institutions, such as the University. As a result of this coordination, we highlight the course "Pedagogy of the Land" and, currently, the implementation of the Degree in Rural Education, which welcomes subjects from the different rural territories, bringing the agendas and demands of this place to the University (Vieira, 2023). As a result of a collective struggle, these individuals are working in their rural communities, echoing the demands, desires and hopes that everyone has the right to access and quality education in the territories where they live. With the social movements, we chant that rural education is a right and not a handout.

In this context, children have the right to be cared for in the countryside, but in a countryside that sees them as subjects, as people, as children who live their childhood in a place that has specific characteristics: struggles for land, occupations, evictions, violence and contradictions. Also to recognize that in the countryside people produce and reproduce their lives based on a collectivity in which it is possible to rebirth hope, social justice and the desire to build beautiful stories with their families in a space free from the exploitation of land, people and the goods of nature. It is with these families that we will build the EIC, based on the right to access and remain in the peasant territory and in the educational institutions.

We call on the leaders of public policies to look at the people who live in the countryside, so that together we can build an EIC that has children and their territories as its foundation.

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