



Evaluation of the relationship between education and sustainability in peasant movements: The experience of the National Education Program in Agrarian Reform



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ABSTRACT

Brazil is one of the largest agricultural producers in the world. However, its agrarian composition is based on two markedly different production models, particularly in relation to sustainability: a peasant family agriculture, which plays an important role in food production for domestic consumption and advocates agro-ecological practises; and agribusiness, the politically and economically hegemonic model that produces commodities for export based on monoculture and intensive use of pesticides. Therefore, in order to create the means to develop peasant lands, social movements and peasants have engaged themselves politically and defended an education model grounded in sustainable practises of production and social organisation. Taking this into account, the main purpose of this paper is to analyse and assess the Brazilian experience of integration between education and sustainability, in the National Education Program in Agrarian Reform (PRONERA). To accomplish this aim, a survey with a semi-structured questionnaire was carried out among teachers, students, monitors, and coordinators of the course offered by PRONERA. The surveys showed that the courses are promoting the concepts of sustainability among peasants. However, many adjustments need to be taken into consideration during the planning process for the next courses offered by PRONERA.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, a country's development has been understood as the increase in its citizens' liberties, whereas liberty must refer both to rights and opportunities (UNDP, 2014). According to Sen (2000), individual liberties contribute to the strengthening of human beings' capacity as social agents, encouraging them to be more autonomous and face the consequences of their own choices. Hence, liberty derived from education takes centre stage, which can be attested by its presence as a component of the Human Development Index (HDI) and in most parts of the quality-of-life dimensions highlighted by Alkire (2002). Education, however, as

with other types of economic and non-economic functioning, can suffer from a series of inequalities, such as gender, race, or social class (Peterson, 2013).

In the current research, we will address the existing educational inequality among residents of rural Brazilian areas. In order to be tackled, this inequality demands specific policies designed to improve education in the countryside. These policies have to take into account the particularities of rural environments and the way of life in the field, with in their different times and socioeconomic insertion situation, and should be intended to improve the population's living conditions.

Sustainability should be considered when it comes to education in the countryside, especially because it has become an increasing concern in the current reality of global warming (Camoto, Mariano, & Rebelatto, 2014). In addition, countryside education is also regarded as sustainable, especially in the social dimension, because it allows for territorial development among peasants. Actually, education in the field emerges as an important

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opportunity to develop peasants' territories, whose production model alleviates the social, economic, and natural costs of the hegemonic production models, since it allows greater economic participation by groups located at the margins of the market. These groups will start to be used for food production in order to fight hunger (Sobreiro Filho, 2011; Wittman, 2009).

Accordingly, the concept of sustainable production, which can refer to agriculture, livestock, and industry, must play a key role. According to Glavič and Lukman (2007), sustainable production may be defined as the creation of goods using processes and systems that are non-polluting and conserve energy; utilise natural resources in economically viable, safe, and healthy ways for employees, communities, and consumers; and are socially and creatively rewarding for all stakeholders in the short and long terms.

The National Education in Agrarian Reform Program (PRONERA¹) is an important example of countryside education in the public policy sphere. This programme was created in Brazil in 1998, as a response to the efforts of social movement and rural union representatives (MDA, 2011). PRONERA may be considered an innovative experience, since it was implemented in a territory that has historically been marked by social exclusion and the absence of public policies in the area of education. Its main goal is to strengthen rural environments as a life territory in all its dimensions: economic, social, political, cultural, and ethical (Fernandes, Welch, & Gonçalves, 2010). Keeping in mind that it has provided education to thousands of youngsters in the countryside, we can affirm that the programme has helped to build another form of territorial development in rural areas based on equity and sustainability.

A fundamental part of PRONERA's structure, particularly with regard to its logic of territorial development, is the intrinsic relationship with the natural dimension of the territory. Nevertheless, PRONERA consubstantiates the elements of the way of life in the field with its different times and dynamics; at the same time, it does not ignore other trends and global levels regarding sustainability. In this sense, PRONERA also comprises at its centre an environmental education logic, which according to Carleton-Hug and Hug (2010) strives to engage the global citizenry in new ways of thinking and acting in, with, and for the environment, contributing to a more environmentally literate population. According to Keene and Blumstein (2010), environmental education has a fundamental role in teaching people to both respect nature and behave in a way that will ultimately preserve it. The countryside education experience of PRONERA analysed in our research was the Special Undergraduate Geography Course (Cooperation among INCRA²/PRONERA/UNESP³/ENFF⁴).

Settled peasants who favour social territorial movements⁵ to debate on transformative actions made by social movements in the space, most of which were related to Via Campesina⁶, were enrolled in this course that took place from 2007 to 2011, alternating between teaching sites at UNESP, in Presidente Prudente, São Paulo (SP), Brazil, and at Florestan Fernandes Nacional School, in Guararema, São Paulo, Brazil, as a part of the pedagogical methodology of alternation⁷. The knowledge acquired from the course was intended to aid peasants with their militancy in social movements, their performance at the settlements'

schools, and with proposing public policies for rural territorial and environmental development, which would make it possible to involve these peasants in building another form of territorial development in the countryside that includes equality and sustainability (Meek, 2015a, 2015b). This course was created based on the logic of PRONERA; thus, it was based on a tripartite management model that resulted from the partnership between universities, social movements, and INCRA.

Taking this into account, the main purpose of this paper is to analyse and assess the Brazilian experience of integration between education and sustainability, in the National Education Program in Agrarian Reform (PRONERA). We are interested in this topic because the study of rural communities has been neglected by universities. Scientific productions about rural communities remain quite precarious. This reality started to change when social-territorial peasant movements began to bring this and other issues up for discussion on a national level (Sobreiro Filho, 2011). However, studies that focus on education in rural areas are still a minority, when compared to studies about urban education. For example, in November 2014, we found 434 occurrences of the term "Rural Education" on the Scopus database, in which only 32 refer to Brazil (Arroyo, 2004; Fernandes & Molina, 2004; Di Pierro & Andrade, 2009; Camacho, 2011b; MDA, 2011; Tarlau, 2015).

Apart from this introduction, this article is divided into five other sections. In the next section, we will summarise the history of existing inequalities between rural and urban environments in Brazil and the effort for a countryside education that may decrease these inequalities. In the third section, we will present PRONERA and establish a dialogue between *The Operation Manual of PRONERA* (2011) and the existing literature about the theme. In the fifth section, we will explain the method adopted in this article. Following that, we will present the main results. Finally, we will present our final considerations in the last section.

2. Countryside education in Brazil

The creation of a new countryside education project is related to the joint efforts of some entities that formed the National Articulation in 1998, in favour of basic education in the countryside. The entities that promoted this movement were: the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB), the Movement for Landless Workers (MST)⁸, UNICEF⁹, UNESCO¹⁰, and University of Brasília (UnB), by means of the Agrarian Reform Support Working Group (GTRA). The first conference called "For a Basic Rural Education" took place in Luziânia, Goiania, Brazil, in 1998 (Fernandes & Molina, 2004; Di Pierro & Andrade, 2009; Camacho, 2011b, 2013, 2015; Tarlau, 2015). One of the main concepts advocated in this conference was the necessity of seeing the countryside as a part of the world, rather than like a derelict thing that lies beyond cities. It was primarily necessary to establish the importance of the countryside and then start to debate countryside education (Fernandes & Molina, 2004).

According to Tarlau (2015, p. 2), "By the early 1990s, the MST was already deeply embedded in the sphere of public education. Activists were collaborating with municipal governments to improve educational practices, helping to train teachers to work in schools on MST settlements and camps. The MST's educational approach, known as the 'pedagogy of the MST', has gained increasing recognition among left-wing groups." This perspective

¹ This abbreviation stands for Programa Nacional de Educação na Reforma Agrária, in Brazilian Portuguese.

² This abbreviation stands for National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform.

³ This abbreviation stands for São Paulo State University.

⁴ This abbreviation stands for National School Florestan Fernandes.

⁵ This is a geographic concept coined by Bernardo Mançano Fernandes.

⁶ This is an international movement of peasants, small- and medium-sized farmers, and landless people.

⁷ Pedagogy of Alternating (Begami, 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Gimonet, 2008, 2009).

⁸ This abbreviation stands for Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra, in Brazilian Portuguese.

⁹ This abbreviation stands for United Nations Children's Fund.

¹⁰ This abbreviation stands for United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.

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