

# THE “RESPONSIBILITY” OF BEING EDUCATORS IN A SOCIAL MOVEMENT SCHOOL

**Marli Zimmermann de Moraes**  
**Elizabete Witcel**

*Landless Workers Movement/ Movimento dos  
Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra, Brazil*

**ABSTRACT** We have been given the challenge of sharing our trajectories of struggle and activism as activists of the MST. In this paper, we will describe our own personal experiences as educators in the MST and discuss the role of research in our struggle for agrarian reform.

“While the pain and the contradictions of capitalism exist and hurt us, it is not possible to let go of our dreams and desires as rebellious socialists.”

-Paulo Freire

## **Introduction** <sup>1</sup>

Both of us are educators who were trained by the MST, and our personal histories are very similar. We both grew up in the northwest region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. We are the daughters of peasants; families that were very poor and did not own any land. We had very little access to schooling.

We decided to join the struggle for land as teenagers, because we felt the necessity to search out a better life. We both joined the MST. We lived in

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<sup>1</sup> This article was translated and edited by Rebecca Tarlau and Nisha Thapliyal

the encampments and participated in land occupations. We saw joining the MST as an opportunity to transform the course of our personal histories. We were looking for an opportunity to be protagonists in our own lives. We decided to step by step construct a path together that would turn us into agents collectively struggling for a more just future.

Beyond the struggle for land, we also searched out access to the education we never had. It was through the MST that we became educators and had the opportunity to continue our studies. When we left our parent's houses we only had primary schooling. However, once we became activists in the movement we felt the need to study, to learn, and to also teach the children that were living in this new reality (created by the movement). It was through this struggle that we constructed our own history and became MST educators and activists.

As we reflect on our experiences in the movement, feelings of pain and indignation mix with feelings of enthusiasm, love, and happiness. We see the movement as a privileged space for the transformation of human beings. We feel we are a part of history now, and that we have learned so much through the movement. To write about our personal and collective histories is hard, because we are forced to remember many difficult moments that we cannot find the words to express.

Our history as militant educators begins with the challenge of educating children, youth, adults in the landless struggle. For ten years we worked as the Coordinators of schools that were very different than most schools; they were called "Itinerant Schools." These schools were located in the MST

encampments, and they were mobile—they accompanied the families living in the encampments throughout the trajectory of their struggle for land. In other words, these schools followed the landless workers as they moved from one land occupation to the next<sup>2</sup>. Every time a camp was disbanded and moved to a different location, the school would follow. Without a doubt, these schools have become part of our history of struggle. During the period that we coordinated these schools we felt a mixture of happiness and fear; we cried and suffered a lot but we were also transformed by these schools. Together, we fought for our rights, marched, struggled, and negotiated. We became subjects and made our own decisions about what we wanted in our schools. Collectively, we have helped to construct a space for schools and education within the movement. For thirty years now, we have struggled through successes and failures, mishaps and confusion, victories and losses, persistence and activism.

To construct schools within a movement is a great challenge. We have to construct another imagination for schooling that is connected to our life experiences - to what we learn while living in the 'black tents' (the MST encampments) and on the road from one occupation to the next. The goal of learning for the men and women in our schools and in the movement is to understand the meaning of the phrase "Hope for a life that is more just and human."

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: The occupation of land which is legally eligible for redistribution does not guarantee automatic and immediate resettlement particularly in regions where the state apparatus and ruling elite are hostile to the MST. Most MST activists participate in multiple occupations over a period of years before they are legally allocated land.

## **The Itinerant School: A School of the Movement based in the Pedagogy of Land**

To discuss the Itinerant School it is necessary to recognize the struggle for land as a basic right of life. The right to live, and the right to fight for land, is like our right to education. Education intertwines with all of the various aspects of our struggle for agrarian reform.

From the very beginning of our struggle for land, the landless (*sem terra*) families that were occupying land searched out alternative ways to educate their children. The families living in the camps insisted that education be a permanent part of the MST's struggle. Children, adolescents, youth and adults all longed to be educated. In the camps, children live in a very specific reality: they participate in marches, protests, land occupations, and all of the different actions that make up our collective fight. Together with their families children are present in these actions, yet they also have the right to "be children," which means studying and having spaces to play and organize themselves.

As our struggle went forward, many experiences made an impact on society and on our movement. These experiences made us realize that we needed to have schools in our camps, in order to continue to move forward in our struggle for land. From this collective necessity the idea of the "Itinerant School" was born—a school that would move with the movement of the camps. These Itinerant Schools became more visible in 1995, when we held a Congress of MST children and youth outside the offices of the state government in the city of Porto Alegre. All the landless children and youth from our

camps participated. One of the themes for discussion was the 1990 Statute of the Rights of Children and Adolescents. The idea to turn the Itinerant School into a formal public school, linked to the state government, emerged out of these conversations. At that point in time, it was not legally possible to have a government schools in our camps. After a year of continuous mobilisations and negotiations, the Secretary of Education (of Rio Grande do Sul) and the State Education Advisory Board, approved the Itinerant Schools as state public schools on November 19, 1996. The state (Ruling No. 1313/96) referred to the transformative education taking place in these schools by giving them the designation of a “pedagogical experiment.”

This new development forced us to rethink the way in which we construct public schools. How could we construct the types of pedagogies that could be part of these schools while still respecting the particular reality of the MST camps. What kind of pedagogy could respond to the demands of this reality? How could the school be part of the process of social transformation that the struggle for land demands? How could we train teachers who were able to handle this challenge? What kinds of relationships, values, and projects did we want in the schools?

### **Organization of the Itinerant School**

In order to organize a school that is in a state of itinerancy, or constant movement, it is necessary to work within a shifting reality. Our challenge was to collectively respond to the new realities we were presented with each day. The difficult moments are always more challenging; it is not easy to talk about

harsh and arduous realities we face. It is the purpose of the school to talk about these contradictory realities that manifest in the dialectic of class struggle; specifically the contradiction between the neglect of land reform and the landless struggle and the growth of big capital and agrobusiness. The role of the state has been to strengthen the ability of domestic and foreign capital to invest in land and monoculture agricultural production. The impact of this social and economic regression is clearly to demotivate workers (rural and urban) from struggle and to look for other means of survival.

The essence of the Itinerant schools is to stimulate students to reflect and respond to different situations and social changes. In contrast, the historical function of schools has been restricted to “training, submission and conformity”. The Itinerant schools are different because of the ways in which they dialogue with the community in order to enable people to reflect and learn from their day-to-day struggles. Internal and external research<sup>3</sup> has highlighted that these schools represent an alternative approach to education. They expand our imaginations about what a school could be, how to construct it, organize it, direct it.

The Itinerant School broke with the idea of a school as “four walls,” ; instead, we reinvented the nature and character of the school each day. The legal victory that established the Itinerant School

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<sup>3</sup> The academy has recognized the importance of the Itinerant School, because of this extensive research that has been conducted. There have also been multiple studies of the Itinerant Schools by MST activists who have written high school and undergraduate theses, as well as masters and doctoral dissertations. All of this research points to the fact that the Itinerant Schools have constructed a pedagogy that is very distinct from other schools, and even with its limits, it represents an education dedicated the working class.

allowed us to guarantee education for the children, youth and adults in our camps, many of whom had been previously denied access to education (because they were poor, rural etc.) One researcher of the Itinerant School writes:

“It is critical to remember that the institution of schooling, historically, was never created for the working class or with the working class. Much less was it ever thought of as part of a social transformation. (Camini, 2009, p. 174)

The MST Itinerant School is integrally connected to the struggle for agrarian reform. It is an educational approach that is popular and transformative; in other words our objective is to guarantee education for the working class which supports them in the struggle for their rights.

Thus, in all these ways, the Itinerant Schools question the approach and organisation of capitalist schools in our country. These schools have become “dangerous,” because they threaten the dominant model of education that supports the hegemony of the dominant class by transmitting the values and ideologies of the bourgeoisie. Those who do not ‘fit’ into this approach are subtly excluded. Bahniuk (2008) analyzes this issue in her Masters research on the Itinerant Schools in Paran a:

The Itinerant School possesses the potential to question the traditional schooling model, because it is located in a space of contestation to the legal and hegemonic order—the MST camps. Furthermore, these schools are based in an educational proposal that is always questioning the dominant model, trying to bring

together the major elements of reality to reflect on the concrete possibility for change. The school can help us think from a perspective that promotes human emancipation. (Bahniuk, 2008, p. 12)

For the MST, to maintain a school like this which is recognised by the state represents a victory in the public sphere. This type of education is the right of the working class, it represents the essence of the landless struggle - the resistance, the rebellion, and the occupation of the large plantations and estates. We will never again allow it to be directed by forces outside of the movement.

### **Pedagogy of the Land and the Landless Struggle**

The educator Paulo Freire has been one of the principle theoretical inspirations for the Itinerant School. His promotion of popular education has helped direct our discussion about generative themes, and the principle of education “based in reality” (Freire, 1994). As educators, we reflect on the everyday tensions in our school and communities, to develop curriculum materials and pedagogies. The educational process in the Itinerant Schools is constantly reconstructed through school and community collectives. The school is never at any moment isolated from these concrete realities. Soviet educator Pistrak (2000) writes, “The school should educate the children in a way that aligns with the spirit of their reality; this spirit should invade the school, but invade it in an organized way; the school should live in the breast of reality, adapting to it and always actively reorganizing itself” (p. 32-33).

The Itinerant School, due its constant itinerancy or movement, searches for mechanisms of interaction with the community. The Itinerant School turn teachers and students into protagonists of their teaching and learning. There are no ready-made recipes for these schools, but rather, open suggestions about how to construct this type of process in every MST camp. The problems that each Itinerant School confronts are challenges that teachers and students in the camp face together. The teachers, students, and parents make every decision in the school collectively, which we refer to as collective governance. The option to study, when and how we want, is discussed in these moments of collective planning. The pedagogical practices that take place in the Itinerant School illustrate that collective planning is indispensable, and all of the teachers, community members, and students need to be involved.

Thus the schools are never allowed to be disconnected from reality, or the problems and social conflicts that the community is confronting. As Camini (2009) writes, “It is impossible to ignore this reality, because it invades the life of the students, never allowing them to live in a fictitious world, one in which you just invent problems to be resolved” (p. 201). The MST’s reality invades the world of the Itinerant School. Knowledge is constructed from reflections on lived experiences and actions. This reality is very dynamic. The challenge is to continuously maintain coherence between theory and practice so that students can engage with reality, build learning through study and research, and develop their creativity and skills.

The Itinerant Schools illustrate that it is possible to construct knowledge production in places and spaces that have never previously been imagined. As the children themselves say, even in a “school without a classroom and without walls we learn.” The mobility of the Itinerant School forces us to teach beneath trees, in pavilions, on the side of the roads, in the middle of the street, in parks, in front of federal and state government buildings, and in the universities. Classes are organized around topics that are based in each of these contexts. The diversity in our classrooms allow us to construct knowledge about life, the world, and how to create an everyday reality that is lighter, more just, and more humane. The challenges that we confront facilitate a more politicized form of learning.

### **The role of research**

Research is understood by the MST as a force that unveils reality, or in other words, “a force that systematically and rigorously allows us to understand our problems more profoundly (scientifically)” (MST, 1996, p. 23). For the MST, the function of research is to interrogate and question appearances, in order to understand the reasons behind individual and collective actions, and the need to struggle, dream, act, and construct a new society. For us, research is:

A method of analyzing the reality in order to propose a more adequate intervention in this reality . . . In our schools, the practice of research is connected to the principle of theory and practice. Research is a method of education

that can be adapted to different ages, and interests, and the specific necessities that develop in the context of each pedagogical process. (MST, 1996, p. 23)

The MST has sought out ways to analyze itself; to know our movement better and learn from that knowledge. We have learned to critically analyze our own actions, and our diverse realities and contexts. We always record our daily movement practices, in order to learn from them.

Research becomes a mirror that we are reflected in, and through which we can listen and learn about the history that we have lived. We have to be vulnerable and open to the reflections that come out of this reading of our reality. This forces us to think about our practices. The richness of the experiences that we have lived—once problematized and studied—will help us understand our reality so we can again transform it.

Much research has been done and is being done on the MST and its struggle for agrarian reform. These external and internal writings play an important role in advancing the pedagogical and political struggle of the MST. At the same time, they force us to reflect and dialogue about the limits, advances, and challenges we face. Research also allows us to get closer to reality, and to question and see more objectively the reality that causes us to struggle each day. Research is an educational space that allows for dialogue; it is space of construction and contradiction, and it is part of the dialectic of life.

Research that is systematized and written from the point of the view of the working class is a

political victory of the struggle. However, at the same time, it also forces us to think about the role of different researchers in our movement. Who is doing research and what is the objective of these researchers? There is no neutrality in research. We believe that research is either done with the intention of contributing to the process that is being studied, or it is done from the position of a different social class. Depending on the ideological point of view of the researcher, the research itself takes a certain tone. It can contribute to the process of struggle, of practice and reflection; it can also provoke concern, indignation, provocation—depending on the intention of the researcher.

We face many challenges in our attempt to receive and accompany researchers in our camps and settlements. The resources they demand are many. For these reasons the MST created a Sector of International Relations (SRI), which deals with this process. While it is not always possible to support the research requests we receive, we try to respond in a reflexive and responsible fashion to these requests. The research that has conducted about the movement by outsiders not organic to the movement has been well received. This research has forced us to reflect on new interpretations of our reality. However, it is always necessary to question the contradictions, difficulties, and divergences of our social movement, because it is only through these new understandings that we can learn to answer, intervene, educate, and develop new practices.

The role of a researcher is not to impose her ideas, to lecture, or to “bring” consciousness to the movement, or to dictate actions based on what she

thinks is most appropriate. Researchers must interact with the reality they are researching, and their insertion into this reality must be connected to practice. Consciousness and knowledge must be constructed through a process of action and reflection, which must have a connection to real social processes. Capturing the conflicts and contradictions of reality opens the way to ruptures and changes. This is the job of the researcher; to allow herself to be educated by the experience she is living. In truth, what a researcher brings us is a dimension of the everyday life of one particular community, from the perspective of that community's dreams, aspirations, and hopes.

According to Marx, "research can be small, unpretentious, singular, but it is the expression of a totality." For us, researchers must search out theoretical and practical responses to the problems of everyday life. Research should allow for the overcoming of appearances, in order to achieve the essence of the social phenomena that is being researched. We see research as a force that insists that we always remake ourselves or recreate our path in order to construct new historical moments.

According to some authors, research is an intervention that becomes an instrument of struggle. We agree with the following statement: "It is not enough to have a social sensibility, it is necessary to have a direction, a method that gets us closer to reality and allows us to achieve the real causes and consequences that allow us to dialectically visualize the way in which we can overcome the apparent phenomena that hide the exploitation of one class over another" (MST, 2007, p. 99).

## Conclusions

We can affirm that to learn is to reflect on our lived experiences, and understand the real meaning of struggle. Research is a product of this comprehension and conception. Knowledge is constructed through our work and through reflection about our work when we review and revisit our practices or re-plan and re-organize our pedagogies. These feelings are manifestations of our ability to choose, weave, and construct collectively a new social project from the point of view of the working class because we believe in the possibility of new times, without oppressors and oppressed.

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