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# The Landless Workers Movement's itinerant schools: occupying and transforming public education in Brazil

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores how social movement co-governance of public education offers an alternative to neoliberal educational models. The Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) is one of the largest social movements in Latin America. We describe one of the many schools that the MST co-governs, the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge (*Caminhos do Saber*), located in an occupied encampment in the state of Paraná. We analyze three of the most unique pedagogical innovations in the school: the teacher's incorporation of 'portions of reality' into classroom teaching, the student work collectives, and the participatory student evaluation process. Although these pedagogies are seemingly mundane changes to everyday school practice, we argue that they represent a challenge to the neoliberal educational model being implemented globally. These movement pedagogies are likely to continue, despite recent conservative attacks, and they offer several concrete lessons for how to effectively contest neoliberal educational practices in other global contexts.

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## Introduction

What does it mean for a school to be connected to a social movement? Social movements are generally understood as collective attempts to transform economic, racial, gender, and other social inequities, through non-institutional means such as protests, marches, hunger strikes, occupations, and other tactics (McAdam 1999; Tarrow 1994). In the United States, some of the most famous social movements have included the women's suffrage movement, the black civil rights movement, anti-war movements, and the immigrant rights movements. More recently, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at Standing Rock all became potent forces demanding social change. Some of these movements have had important educational demands; for example, desegregation was a central demand of the civil rights movement. In the late 1960s, the Third World Liberation Front, a network of Black, Latino, Asian-American, and Native American student groups, demanded an Ethnic Studies Department at the San Francisco State University (Pulido 2007; Rojas 2007). Community organizations, from the Industrial Areas Foundation to the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (closed in 2010), have also

incorporated educational demands into their economic and political struggles (Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister 2009; Shirley 1997). Similarly, in Latin America, literacy programs were a central part of the revolutionary movements in Nicaragua and El Salvador (Hammond 1998; Arnove 1986); black movements in Colombia and Brazil have demanded afro-centric curriculum (Paschel 2016; Pereira 2015); and indigenous groups throughout the region have demanded access to bilingual and intercultural education (Oviedo and Wildemeersch 2008).

Thus, education is often a central concern of social movements. But, returning to the original question, what would it look like for social movements to go beyond making demands on the public education system, and instead become a central part of co-governing public schools? For example, what would education become if the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement could participate in the governance of the public education system and incorporate into schools the values and goals of their movement? To what extent can any social movement transform schools into institutions that contest rather than reproduce social and economic inequality, in particular in this era of neoliberal teacher 'accountability' mechanisms, high-stakes standardized testing, and scripted curriculum?

We attempt to answer these questions by drawing on the experience of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST), one of the largest and most influential social movements in Latin America (Wright and Wolford 2003; Wolford 2010; Branford and Rocha 2002; Fernandes and Stédile 2002; Ondetti 2008; Carter 2015). The MST is an agrarian reform movement, with the primary goal of redistributing large, often unproductive land estates to landless farmers. Since the movement's founding in 1984, approximately 350,000 families (1.5 million people) have received land through MST-led land occupations, with tens of thousands of people still living in occupied encampments waiting for land rights (Wright and Wolford 2003). The MST also struggles for the transformation of neoliberal capitalism, through the establishment of new forms of economic and social relations in the countryside based on family farming, food sovereignty, agro-ecology, solidarity, collective work, and socialist practices. Since the very beginning of the movement's agrarian reform struggle, MST leaders have realized that to achieve social transformation it is not only necessary to occupy land but also to occupy the public education system, and transform schools into institutions that support their movement's broader political and economic goals.

Over the past 30 years, the MST has developed a unique pedagogical proposal for public education that MST leaders have been able to implement in hundreds of schools across the country, in both regions where the movement has won land rights and where families are still occupying land (Caldart 2004; Tarlau 2013, 2015, 2019; Mariano and Knopf 2015). Unlike other social movements that demand autonomy from the state, such as the Mexican Zapatistas (Vergara-Camus 2014; Glass 2010), the MST does not promote its own, parallel education system. Rather, the movement maintains that it is the state's responsibility to provide public education, but communities have the right to co-govern these schools. Thus, the MST is a perfect case to examine what it means for a school to be connected to a social movement, and how social movement co-governance of public education offers an alternative to neoliberal models of education and schooling.

## **Theoretical framework and foundations of the MST's pedagogical approach**

This article takes an overall Gramscian approach to the study of social movements and education, analyzing schools as institutions that most often reproduce the economic and

racial inequities in the broader society, but also holding the possibility for promoting progressive social change.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that MST activists themselves draw on Antonio Gramsci's (1971) writings, in particular when discussing the need to develop organic, grassroots intellectuals in their movement and to bring their struggle into a wide range of state institutions. From this perspective, the state is a complex of social relations, not a unified and coherent all-power force; therefore, there is room for social movements to promote their goals within different state spheres. Moreover, MST leaders realize that if they do not engage the state, then other religious, conservative, or reactionary organizations will promote their own social vision within these influential institutions; for example, within the public school system.

Beyond an overall Gramscian perspective on the potential for social movement-led institutional change, movement activists also draw on a range of educational theorists when developing educational practices for their schools. Generally, these theories fall into three categories: practices and ideas stemming from Paulo Freire's (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; socialist pedagogies; and the movement's own internal practices and organizational structure. A central part of the movement's perspective on student engagement in the classroom is inspired by Freire's theory of more democratic relations between teachers and students. The movement believes that every student has the right to participate (in the movement's own words, become a 'protagonist') in developing her own educational experiences. The teacher is not the owner of knowledge; the student has her own life experiences that she can contribute to education and learning. Nonetheless, the teacher and the student have different functions, and it is important for the teacher to help the student acquire the disciplinary knowledge that humanity has historically produced, but with the student's participation through self-organization and self-governance.

The movement also draws on the pedagogical experiences implemented in other socialist contexts such as the Soviet Union and Cuba. For example, in this article we discuss the MST's implementation of Moisey Pistrak's ideas, one of the major educational leaders in the Soviet Union in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the MST draws on Pistrak's idea that manual labor is an educational process and therefore it is critical to teach students the value of collective work through manual labor tasks in schools. The movement also draws on Anton Makarenko, a Ukrainian educator who set up schools for orphans after the Bolshevik revolution, as well as the writings of Nadezhda Krupskaya, the Soviet Union's Deputy Minister of Education and Vladimir Lenin's wife. From the Cuban context, the movement has been inspired by the experiences of the 1961 Cuban literacy campaign, and over the past decade the movement has implemented versions of Cuba's *Sí Se Puede* (Yes, you can) literacy program in Brazil. Importantly, MST activists do not simply imitate these Soviet and Cuban practices, but rather they draw on them and learn from them to create a pedagogical proposal for the movement's specific Brazilian context. The movement believes that it is much more productive to learn directly from the actual experiences of movements and organization that have developed socialist educational practices, rather than simply read theoretical discussions of these ideas. Therefore, while MST leaders study the works of many different Marxist educational theorists, including Mario Manacorda (2012) and Dermeval Saviani (1973, 1983), their educational program is based on concrete, historical educational experiences.

Finally, the third inspiration for the MST's pedagogical approach is the movement's own internal organizational practices. For example, the practice of incorporating cultural performances throughout the school day that embody the struggle for social justice, known as *místicas*,

is a tradition that the movement uses during other meetings and events. The self-organization of students in schools through small collectives known as base nuclei is a reflection of the organizational structure in MST camps and settlements. The MST also prioritizes the teaching of agro-ecology in schools, as a means of showing students the importance of sustainable agricultural practices and food sovereignty. Finally, MST leaders integrate lessons about the history of agrarian reform into the school curriculum, including the movement's own history. The overall goal of these schools is not to train students to become MST activists, but rather to develop students' capacities to become leaders fighting for a better world, in multiple roles. A central aspect of preparing students to become leaders is making sure they are introduced to all of the knowledge that humanity has historically produced, from mathematics, to science, to history – knowledge that has been traditionally denied to the working-class populations. Therefore, the goals of the schools are threefold: provide students access to all existent science and disciplinary knowledge; develop students' diverse human capacities, including their social, cultural, artistic capacities, and ability to work collectively; and teach students about the histories of class struggle and develop their identity as part of the working class.

## Methods and case selection

In this article, we describe one of the many schools that the MST co-governs, the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge (*Caminhos do Saber*), located in the rural region of the southern state of Paraná, Brazil. The school is known as an 'itinerant school' because it is one of about a dozen schools in Paraná located inside an occupied area. On 12 December 2003, after multiple mobilizations and protests, the MST was able to win the state's agreement for these schools to function as part of the state public school network. The movement also won the right for the schools to 'move' with the families if they were evicted and relocated to another area (hence, the schools are considered itinerant or mobile). This legislation paved the way for itinerant schools to be set up in dozens of new camps that were created through MST-led land occupations over the next 15 years.

This article is a product of a collaborative research effort. Alessandro Mariano is an MST activist from the state of Paraná who helped to oversee these itinerant schools for 10 years and is now pursuing a doctoral degree in education. Rebecca Tarlau is a US-born scholar-activist who has conducted research on the MST's educational initiatives since 2009. Much of the information and data in this article are drawn from our past decade of participation in and research on the movement. For Mariano, this has included both his long-term leadership position coordinating the itinerant schools and the two master's theses he completed about the pedagogical process in the schools, which involved extensive participant observation and interviewing. For Tarlau, her knowledge is based on 20 months of ethnographic research between 2009 and 2015, observing MST educational activities and interviewing more than 200 movement leaders and state officials.

In addition to drawing on these past experiences and data collection, this article is a product of a joint field visit to the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge in April 2017. During this week in the camp, we observed all of the educational activities of the school and interviewed eight students, four teachers, and the two co-principals (known as pedagogical coordinators). We also participated in a three-day teacher training program in the following week, for all of the teachers and pedagogical coordinators of the dozen itinerant schools across the state, during which we interviewed the university professor coordinating this

training and two state officials. We took extensive field notes and transcribed all of the interviews, and then we coded the data for relevant themes about the MST's pedagogical approach. More specifically, we created codes that highlighted the pedagogical practices in the schools that were potentially challenging the neoliberal educational model, defined as the trend toward accountability, high-stakes testing, standardized curriculum, and top-down governance. The three pedagogical interventions we highlight and all of the quotes and descriptions in this article are drawn from that joint data collection and data analysis process. However, much of the historical detail and theoretical context in the article is also based on our extensive work and research with the MST over the past decade.<sup>3</sup>

The article is organized into five sections. First, we briefly describe the history of the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge and its connection to the MST's agrarian reform struggle. Then, we analyze three of the most unique pedagogical innovations in the school: the student work collectives, the teacher's incorporation of 'portions of reality' into classroom teaching, and the participatory student evaluation process. We argue how each of these practices, while seemingly mundane changes to everyday school practice, represent a direct challenge to the neoliberal educational model being implemented globally. Finally, we discuss the challenges of maintaining a school that is openly linked to a radical social movement, especially in Brazil's increasingly conservative political context.

## **The itinerant school paths of knowledge**

The Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge is located in Camp Maila Sabrina, in the municipality of Ortigueira, in the state of Paraná. The camp is named after a three-year-old girl who died of leukemia in the early weeks of the land occupation. The occupation that led to the creation of this camp took place on 18 June 2005, with 500 landless families. These families occupied this area, a large plantation known as the Brazilian Fazenda, which was owned by a rich landowner who was raising cattle and buffalo on part of the property, but not using the majority of the land. The MST leaders thus argued that the government had the right to expropriate the property and redistribute the land to the landless families, based on a clause in the 1988 Brazilian constitution that land has to be used for social good. After the property was occupied in 2005, the owner tried to use the court system to evict the families. Although the families have been able to resist eviction for the past 12 years, police have constantly threatened to forcibly remove the families.

As of April 2017, there were 400 families, around 1500 people, living in the occupied encampment, still trying to pressure the government to redistribute the land. The families decided to build a school in the camp for two reasons: the difficulty the children in the camp had accessing other schools in the region; and also the families' desire to have a school that supported the MST's fight for agrarian reform. With the help of the MST education sector – the collective of leaders that dedicate themselves full time to implementing the movement's educational program – the community built its own school that the government immediately recognized as a state public school, and which began to function at the end of 2005.

## **Pedagogical innovations**

In April 2017, we visited the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge to see how the MST's participation in the school had transformed its organization and pedagogical approach. To



reach the school, we drove down a long dirt road for over an hour, until we reached a gate to enter the occupied encampment. Despite the fact that the families have lived on this land for the past 12 years, the community still maintains a 24-hour security post to protect the camp from unannounced police eviction or other threats. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the security post at the entrance of the camp.

The school is located on the other side of the hill from the security post and has a view of the entire camp. The families in the camp built the school themselves, voluntarily, using wooden planks that they dismantled from several houses that were scattered throughout the plantation when they arrived. The families used the screws, nails, and wood from these houses to build the school. The very precarious infrastructure of the school includes a main building, with an office space for the school's administrators and teachers, a small library, a cafeteria where the students are served a snack each day, and eight stand-alone classrooms (small shacks) surrounding the main building. There are also three smaller structures; one that is used to keep the students' school records, another for storing the school's limited equipment (gardening tools, cleaning supplies), and a third that the student media collective uses, which has a computer and a printer. There are also two outdoor latrines and a small soccer field where the students take physical education classes each week. [Figure 2](#) shows the students at the school gathering to sing and read poetry together, a daily morning practice at the school. [Figure 3](#) and [4](#) are classrooms of students studying at the itinerant school.

In April 2017, the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge had 180 students, who study during three different periods (a common practice in Brazilian education). During the morning period (7:15 am–noon), the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh-graders take classes; then in the afternoon (1:15–6:00 pm), the first, second and third-graders and the eighth and ninth-graders arrive; and finally in the evening (6:30–11:00 pm), the high school students study. A total of 25 people work at the school; two pedagogical coordinators (who offer pedagogical support to the teachers and share the administrative job of school principal), 19 teachers (seven elementary school teachers and 12 middle and high school teachers), one administrative assistant, two volunteer cooks, and one volunteer custodian. Although seven of the high school teachers live in nearby towns, and travel to the camp each day to teach, all of the other



**Figure 1.** Security Gate at the Camp Maila Sabrina (photo by authors).



**Figure 2.** Students gathered for morning activities at the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge (photo by authors).



**Figure 3.** Students studying at the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge (photo by authors).

teachers and employees live in the occupied encampment. The state government pays all of these employees through temporary contracts that have to be renewed annually. This means that the MST education collective has to justify the need for the school to exist each year, and the movement often has to mobilize the families to put pressure on the government to renew the contract. When we were at the school in April, the contract for the current year had not yet been approved, and all of the teachers were working as volunteers. The MST education collective was frantically meeting with Department of Education representatives and lawyers to negotiate the new contract. It was not until the middle of May, four months into the school year, that the contract for 2017 was finally approved.

The fact that the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge exists is in and of itself a tremendous accomplishment, which supports the sustainability of the MST's land occupations, as the school has become a center of family life in the camp. In addition, the movement





**Figure 4.** Students studying at the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge (photo by authors).

has developed an alternative pedagogical and organizational approach for the school, which aligns with the movement's social and economic goals. Although there is not space to talk about all of the components of this educational proposal in this article, we focus on three pedagogical innovations and their relationship to the movement's struggle: connecting the curriculum to 'portions of reality,' student work collectives, and the participatory evaluation process. We argue that these three interventions in the structure of the public school system represent a direct challenge to the neoliberal economic and educational model in Brazil.

### ***Incorporating students' reality into the curriculum***

One innovative aspect of the school's pedagogical approach is the incorporation of students' reality into the curriculum, what the movement refers to as connecting 'portions of reality' to disciplinary content. The MST education collective in Paraná began to develop this approach in 2011, after a state-wide evaluation of the itinerant schools that showed a need for a curriculum that was connected to the students' lives, while also allowing students to acquire all of the content knowledge that is taught in the regular school system. In order to write this new curriculum, the movement began to study in more depth the experience of the commune schools, which were public schools built in the 1920s that attempted to connect schooling to the revolutionary process unfolding in the Soviet Union. Moisey Pistrak, a Soviet pedagogue who was influential in reforming the school system after the Bolshevik revolution, wrote extensively about these schools. Although there are no English translations of Pistrak's writings, in 1980 a Portuguese version of one of his texts was published. Then, in the 2000s, a Brazilian intellectual and close ally of the MST, Luiz Carlos de Freitas (professor at the State University of São Paulo), traveled to Russia to translate another of Pistrak's books, *A Escola-Comuna* (The Commune School), into Portuguese (Pistrak 2009). With the help of this translation, the MST leaders in Paraná reflected on how they could combine these Soviet ideas with the practices the movement had accumulated over the previous three decades; for example, their vast experience with the pedagogical ideas of Paulo Freire

(Tarla 2015). The goal was not to transfer Pistrak's ideas into their schools, but recreate these historical experiences in a form appropriate to their local Brazilian agrarian context.

Based on this synthesis, the MST education collective proposed implementing 'study complexes' in the itinerant schools, a concept they drew directly from Pistrak's writings. The study complexes are an attempt to connect the educational process to students' present reality by bringing together scientific knowledge, manual labor, and self-governance. In an explanation of this concept, Freitas (2009, 24) quotes Pistrak as saying:

This is not practice just for practice, outside of the social practice of the school, but rather a revisiting of social practices. The child has, itself, marks of reality, of social practice, because she or he is part of the present, of social practice. The child is inserted into the middle of social reality and this material reality, with all of its peculiarity and its culture, also educates.

In other words, the goal of the study complexes is not just 'learning by doing,' but rather reflection on the social practices in which the students are already embedded. The goal of the school is to help students study the present reality, and to penetrate it, understand it, act on it, and dive into it. The reality of the students should occupy the school, however, in a way that is organized, planned, and connected to academic content.

In the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge, the teachers understand that the basic idea of the study complexes is to connect every component of the curriculum to a part of the student's reality, what is referred to as a 'portion of reality.' The teachers develop the study complexes through a collective planning process, which first involves an 'inventory of reality,' a tool that the teachers use to find out more about the school and the surrounding community. To take an 'inventory' is to collect and organize information about the material and immaterial components of a particular reality. In the case of the itinerant schools, the categories of the inventory of reality include 'educational sources' (objects or spaces that students learn from outside the school), forms and organization of work, natural resources (biodiversity), social struggles, and the political and organizational features of the families. For example, in Camp Maila Sabrina, the teachers identified the most important educational spaces as the river, forest reserve, and playground; the types of agricultural work as cultivation of grains, raising of dairy cows, and temporary wage work; and regional political struggles such as the fight for agrarian reform, against pine reforestation, and for indigenous rights.

After collecting this information, the teachers synthesize the inventory of reality, by categorizing and grouping the information, and creating the 'portions of reality' that the teachers will connect to each component of the curriculum. When we were at the school, the portions of reality that the teachers were using that semester included the Struggle for Agrarian Reform, Peasant Culture, Production of Food, Spaces in the Camp, and Communitarian Organization. The classroom planning involved the teachers making a connection between each component of the curriculum and one portion of reality. For example, in the sixth-grade mathematics curriculum, the lessons on mathematics operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, division) and the expression of natural numbers (the meaning of operations, addition and subtraction of natural numbers, multiplication and division with natural numbers) are all taught using the portion of reality 'Production of Food.' All of the mathematics calculations were based on numbers that came from the camp's harvests, such as the amount of rice produced each month or the change in a person's income when the price of milk falls. Another example is the sixth-grade geography curriculum, which includes landscapes, places, regions, territory, nature, and society. The teacher

connects these topics to the 'Spaces in the Camp,' including the rivers, mountains, and forest reserves. In the planning process, the teachers have to write down the methodology that they are going to use, beyond lecturing, and how they will incorporate research, on-site observation, and more hands-on pedagogies into their teaching. The teachers also detail the assignments that the students have to complete, including written texts, poems, artistic presentations, and photography.

This process of collective classroom planning, in which teachers work together to connect every aspect of the curriculum to a portion of the students' local reality, is not easy. We talked to teachers at the schools about their experiences with this approach, and while some were enthusiastic, others expressed frustration. Marli, a high school science teacher, explained her classroom planning process:

When I plan I always apply the curriculum to a portion of reality. Let's take an easy example of one portion of reality, healthy food ... What part of the biology curriculum is related to healthy foods? For seventh graders, I am going to choose the food chain, and for the sixth graders I will pick the topic of soil. Also for the seventh graders I will touch on the topic of vegetation, the development of plants. For the eighth graders, I will talk about nutrition. In ninth grade we discuss the chemical components of soil, the nutrients that help our bodies. So, I take the idea of healthy foods, as though it was an overarching theme, but we call it a portion of reality, and we relate it to our curriculum.

Joélia, a second-grade teacher, was also able to incorporate portions of reality into her process of classroom planning:

We plan our classes each semester, for example we have three portions of reality this semester, the production of food, the spaces in the camp, and culture ... For example, we have a unit now on animals. We read a text and we learned about the animals in the text, then I asked the students to find out the main animals that live in the camp, and now we are organizing the animals in the camp into categories, as mammals, herbivores.

However, Marcelo, a physical education teacher who just arrived at the school the year before, was having more difficulties: It is hard to reconcile this process in physical education, because with geography you can study farming, or with math you can calculate hectares, but physical education is limited to exercises with the body ... for example this afternoon we will learn about volleyball, how do you connect this?

Despite Marcelo's difficulties, most of the teachers seemed to be integrating the study complexes into their classroom planning, with the help of the MST educational leaders and university supporters who frequently visited the camp to support the teachers. For the MST, the process of linking the school curriculum to students' reality is not simply a way to make the information more accessible. It also supports the MST's belief that scientific knowledge should help to resolve the concrete needs of working-class communities. The 'study complexes' ensure that students acquire all of the content and knowledge that society has produced (from advanced mathematics to classical literature), because the teachers start with an established curriculum and then they relate this curriculum to a portion of reality. The study complexes are different from Freire's (2000) method of teaching using 'generative themes' as a starting point for the educational process. In the case of the study complexes, teachers start with the curriculum and then map it onto reality, therefore covering all of the intended materials, while in the case of the generative themes

the curriculum is built out from the local thematic content. The exercise of connecting academic content to students' lives helps the students reflect on real-live phenomena (humanity, nature, society), while also involving them in the organization of the school and the camp.

The study complexes strengthen the critical education of the students by countering the neoliberal tendencies of technical training. These include the tendencies toward specialization and the narrowing of the curriculum to exclude subjects such as sociology and philosophy. The study complexes allow for the connection between the content of diverse disciplines and one's life and local reality. For the MST, the hope is that through this form of education students also learn how to fight for their social rights, such as the right to land, housing, and education, and understand the contradictions of capitalism – thus becoming part of a process of constructing a more equal, socially justice, and free society.

### ***Student self-governance and work***

Two other integral components of the 'study complexes,' beyond the appropriation of socially relevant scientific knowledge, are the promotion of work as an educational process and the practice of student self-governance. The MST supports self-governance and the integration of work into the school day through the students' 'work collectives' (nuclei sectors, or *núcleos sectoriais*), which are the most important organizational component of the itinerant school. The work collectives are considered an 'organization cell' of the school, a space where the students can participate in the governance of the school and also complete work tasks that are necessary for the school to function.

In part, the idea for the work collectives came from the MST's own organizational structure. In every MST camp and settlement, families participate in the governance of the camp through base nuclei (small collectives) of 10 families, which send representatives to a camp-wide or settlement-wide decision-making body, thus allowing everyone to have a voice in the governance of the camp. The movement also has 'thematic work sectors,' which are collectives that deal with specific issues such as agricultural production, health, education, and youth engagement. The student work collectives or 'nuclei sectors' in the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge are a combination of these two forms of organization within the movement: base nuclei + thematic sectors.

In addition to their own internal practices, the MST leadership also draws on the Soviet pedagog Viktor N. Shulgin's (2013, 68–69) idea of 'socially necessary work.' Similarly to Pistrak, although the movement had been familiar with Shulgin's ideas previously, it was only in 2013 that Luiz Carlos de Freitas translated one of Shulgin's texts into Portuguese and the movement could then deepen their understanding of this concept. Social necessary work is not something invented to keep students busy, but rather something that is necessary due to the reality of the school, students' lives, the town, or the community. According to Shulgin, the school should determine these tasks in conversation with the other organizations in the surrounding area, with the following questions in mind:

What is the role of the region in the broader economic system? 2) What are the socially necessary work tasks determined by the economy, life, etc. of the region during the upcoming year? 3) What organizations attempt to resolve these problems and what participation can the

school have? 4) In what months, with what groups, and in what forms, are these tasks executed and how? 5) How can this work be coordinated with other organizations and through the work program at the school? 6) What forces [resources/power] can the school attract for this work and how? (Shulgin 2013, 80)

As this excerpt illustrates, socially necessary work is directly connected to the needs of the community, and it is carried out in coordination with community members and organizations. The goal of student work cannot simply be fundraising or school maintenance, but rather must go beyond the realm of the school. As Freitas (2009, 33) explains: What gives the school life? ‘What inserts it into reality and, at the same time, allows for the strengthening of practices of self-governance and self-direction? Work. In terms of the realm of education, we try to examine work as a source of knowledge, or in other words, as an educational principle.’

Thus, work itself is an educational process that helps students’ holistic development. However, this work also has to be ‘linked organically and directly with learning’ (Shulgin 2013, 72), or, in other words, connected to students’ intellectual advancement in the traditional academic sense.

In the Itinerant School Paths of knowledge, the student work collectives included students across various ages and grades, which breaks up the traditional separation of students by age. Each of the work collectives has autonomy to complete its tasks, while also sending two coordinators to participate in a school-wide executive committee that makes decisions which affect the entire school. The school-wide executive committee also includes several teacher representatives and the two pedagogical coordinators. The number of work collectives is determined by assessing the real needs of the students and teachers at the school, with the goal of promoting ‘socially necessary work.’

In other words, the work collectives are organized to engage the students in practical activities (teacher support, finances, community projects), as well as the daily work that is needed for the school to function (cleaning, cooking). While the student work collectives are set up according to the real demands of the school and community, they are also organized around learning objectives. Thus, the work collectives have three goals: engage students in the tasks that need to be completed for the betterment of the school and community; connect these work tasks to disciplinary and learning objects; and involve the students in the process of governing, administrating, and improving the school through collective organization. This, essentially, is the ‘study complex’: the organic connection between work, self-governance, and the accumulation of scientific knowledge. Table 1 summarizes the work collectives in the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge, the students’ responsibilities, and how these tasks relate to learning.

During our visit to the school, we participated in several of these work collectives. In the morning school period, when the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh-graders were studying, we participated in the finance collective. There were 17 students from all four grades and two teachers who were overseeing the 45-minute meeting. A fifth-grade student named Leticia was one of the two student coordinators, and was asking the other students to suggest materials that the school needed to buy. One student mentioned the need for a lamp, and others mentioned batteries and locks for the classrooms. When one student said that the school needed more fans, Leticia reminded the student that they had already suggested buying seven fans and that this request had been approved by the school-wide executive committee. Figure 5 shows the meeting of the finance collective, with Leticia at the front leading the discussion with the support of a teacher.



**Table 1.** Organization of student work collectives in the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledges.

Work sector	Students' responsibilities	Related skills
Memory collective	Students are responsible for keeping a daily record of what occurs in the school. This collective writes about the activities in the school using three different methods: a daily school diary; documentation of the pedagogical practices in the school; and photographic and audiovisual archives	Orthography, writing, organization of texts, archiving, reading, etc.
Culture and communication collective	Students are responsible for sharing information about the schools with the families in the camp and nearby settlements. This collective provides everybody with facts about the school. The collective organizes the school's radio, newspaper, and announcement boards. They also read out loud the school's diary each morning	Speaking, writing, the use of diverse technologies such as the radio, Internet, newspapers, murals
Teacher support collective	Students are involved in the teaching process in the school, helping with the planning of lessons and the scheduling of diverse educational spaces. They are also responsible for organizing the educational materials and equipment in the school, such as the television, radio, and DVD player, all of the school's materials. This collective is also responsible for organizing the library and the school's office. The collective also welcomes visitors to the school, which involves presenting to visitors the school's pedagogical proposal and the school's daily dynamics	Organization, how to take care of equipment, and cataloguing books and information. They also learn about how to welcome outside people, how to present on the pedagogical proposal of the school, and the school's logic, etc.
Finance and structure collective	Students are involved in the financial and administrative planning of the school. They help to organize the school's financial processes, including the money that comes in and out of the school, financial planning, and the payment of bills. They oversee the schools expenses; for example, funding of daily meals	Calculation, electronic tables, planning, and financial management
School decorations collective	This collective helps to organize the school's appearance. Students try to create an environment where nature and human activities are in harmony. They are primarily involved in three activities: planting flowers, trees, and bushes; organization of school's esthetic appearance, for example the identification of spaces to exhibit student projects; and finding ways to value the school's symbols (flag, mascot, etc.)	Esthetics, organization of environments, planting and gardening, art projects, planning
Health and wellness collective	Students are responsible for the collective wellness of the school. This collective is responsible for ensuring healthy food is served, and also to monitor student hygiene and well being. They execute cleaning tasks and hold meetings to discuss healthy eating habits and hygiene	Basic cleaning procedures and hygiene as well as the preparation of healthy food
Agriculture	Students are responsible for the agricultural practices at the school. They plan the school's food production and take care of the agro-ecological gardens, orchards, plantation, and animal husbandry. This food is allocated for both the school and families in the encamped communities	Learn about rural practices, from planning the agricultural production to the harvesting of the plants, all based in scientific knowledge about agricultural production



**Figure 5.** Students in the finance collective meeting to discuss the budget of their school.

At one point a student near me asked one of the teachers in the room whether he could go to the bathroom and the teacher pointed to Leticia and said ‘you have to ask her.’ Leticia nodded to the student, and continued to ask her peers for other suggestions. Unfortunately, many of the students were not paying attention, and we later heard that some of the students (and teachers) consider these working groups a ‘free period.’ However, for the MST, the work collectives are an attempt to engage students in the governance of their own school by participating in daily tasks such as creating the school budget, which are usually off limits to students. Later that day, Leticia explained to us the objective of her work collective:

In the finance nucleus, we have to figure out the accounting for the school. They tell us the budget of the school, and we have to figure out the budget, based on what we need to buy for the school, and then we give this to Jones [the pedagogical coordinator] ... sometimes we do raffles if there is not enough money to buy something.

That afternoon we participated in the health and wellness collective, and we watched as half of the students went around the school and picked up trash and the other half worked in the school garden. The health and wellness collective included a range of ages, from the first-grade students to the eighth-graders, working together to clean the school. [Figure 6](#) shows the health and wellness collective working in the front of the school.

Later that evening, we participated in the communication collective, which only included high school students. These students were discussing the school newspaper that they were going to produce. One student had the idea of interviewing community members in the camp about their life experiences, which could be featured each week in the newspaper. The student said ‘Imagine how much history people have in this camp, and we have never asked them about their lives.’ This same student volunteered to write up an interview protocol, which they could debate at the next meeting. A high school student explained her perception of the work collectives:

In the work collectives, we all have a responsibility, before everyone just cared about themselves, we did not do anything together. Now we have to help each other ... before when we wanted something there was no way to ask, we had to talk directly to Jones [the pedagogical



**Figure 6.** Students in the health and wellness collective gardening in the front of the school.

coordinator], and there were always lots of students going to talk to Jones and it was not every organized. Now we have an executive committee and we bring our issues to the committee to be resolved ... For example, if there is no light in the bathroom, we bring this to the committee.

These work collectives directly support the MST's broader economic and political goals, allowing the students to practice collective organization while also obtaining the knowledge, abilities, and talents necessary for a deeper form of human development. The students learn how to work, plan, and execute collective tasks; analyze problems and think strategically about how to resolve these issues; and create effective forms of organization, with the participation of everyone in the decision-making process. For the MST, these are critical lessons, as the hope is for the youth to become active members of the governance of the camp, and also begin to participate in the regional and state-wide thematic work sectors that sustain the movement. Thus, the work sectors confront the neoliberal logic, which directs the role of education toward individualism, in the sense of competition, entrepreneurship, and consumption. In contrast, including work as an educational principle allows students to practice collective organization, cooperative work, and the resolution of their own problems. They are spaces of collective development, student protagonism, and linking theory and practice. The work sectors are also an instrument for learning about the social value of manual labor, in the sense of collectively working in the service of the larger community.

### ***Participatory student and teacher evaluation process***

Finally, perhaps the most important pedagogical innovation of the school, given the current global high-stakes testing culture, is the school's participatory evaluation process of students and teachers, which is referred to as the Participatory Class Counsel (*Conselho de Classe Participativa*). There are no grades in the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge. The MST is against a system of grading because the movement believes that this reproduces the capitalist economic structure and hierarchical power relations. Through grading, students

learn the most important aspects of the capitalist order: that they will receive a reward (or punishment) for their hard work. From the MST's perspective, grading is an artificial motivator for learning, as it is based on a system of punishment and reward, not the intrinsic value of education and human development. The movement believes that grading is the ultimate form of capitalist exchange, as one's reward for a good performance is attributed entirely to individual capabilities.

For these reasons, the movement has developed a participatory evaluation system, which involves teachers' constant qualitative feedback – no grading. This system of evaluation is also reflective of the movement's belief in critique and self-critique. In other words, the movement understands that for working-class people to continue to improve the world around them it is necessary for them to evaluate and assess their progress, and for these critiques to come both from themselves and others. In the educational realm, one of the MST's central goals is for students to acquire all of the disciplinary knowledge that has been produced historically. In the classroom, this means that it is the teacher's job to constantly offer feedback on both a student's individual progress and the collective progress of the entire class. However, it is also the student's job to evaluate her own progress and the teacher's own contributions.

All of the teachers we talked to at the school supported this qualitative and collective evaluation process. For example, when we asked Marli about the lack of testing and grades, she responded:

I ask the students questions and they respond, but we do not call these tests. The students will write texts related to the science projects they are developing ... yesterday I asked for an essay from them about healthy foods, and the essays are written as individuals, but we do not give the students a grade, we do qualitative feedback, assessing if the student understood the activity ...

[But do you agree with not having grades?]

I worked in a regular school before ... but I never agreed with grades. It is not the grade that is going to help the student, the student needs to know what he is learning or not. The grade does not say that. When students take tests sometimes they are nervous and are not able to respond. Therefore, the development of the student, what he is doing, how he is constructing a project, is going to show us more clearly than a test about whether the student is learning.

In addition to this constant feedback on students' progress, once a semester each teacher also holds a collective evaluation process, called a Participatory Class Council, which involves a several-hour meeting with all of the students, parents, and the teacher. First, the teacher will evaluate one of the students. The student then has the opportunity to respond and say whether she or he agrees with the teacher's evaluation, and then also do a self-evaluation. Two of the student's peers (usually the two sitting to the right or left of the student) will then say whether they agree with the teacher and the student's responses. The parents of the student then have an opportunity to contribute. This happens with every student, with everyone present. Marli explained to us how she would evaluate a student:

For example, if there is a student who participates and completes assignments, but is struggling with writing, I am going to start off talking about his behavior. That he is very well behaved, he completes all of the activities, he participates well in groups, has a good relationship with his peers, and pays attention ... one of his peers might disagree and say, 'I do not agree, he always talks during class when you are not paying attention' ... but another student might say, 'I agree with the teacher that he always completes the activities' ... I also talk about

his learning, I might say that the student in certain areas like reading still needs to develop more, and I tell him if you are not developing your reading and writing you are not going to interpret texts adequately ...

We asked Marli if the students were ever embarrassed, or sad, when she publically critiqued them. She responded: 'When we evaluate negative aspects of the students, we also tell them what they can do to improve. We do not just critique, we tell them how they can develop.' She said students are now accustomed to this public and participatory evaluation process. Although students cannot 'fail' a grade, there are important consequences of a negative evaluation. For example, if the teacher assesses that a student has not achieved the sufficient level of learning by the end of the year, the student is asked to take a 'reinforcement class' the following year, which is an additional five hours of study each day that repeat the lessons of the previous year.

When we asked the students about the evaluation system, and how they felt when the teacher evaluates them publicly, they had different opinions. One said: 'For me, I think it is good that they tell us. Then at least I know what I am doing, what I am doing poorly and how I can improve.' Another said 'I feel bad, because I know I was wrong.' A third told us: 'I do not say anything, I feel the same as everyone else, because we have the chance to critique everyone also. If we are able to critique, then we should be critiqued.' Leticia, the student coordinator of the finance nuclei, gave a more elaborated answer: I feel ... I do not know. The teacher can critique us, she can tell us that we are not paying attention, because then there will be a moment when she has to receive critiques also. No one is perfect, at some point everyone is going to receive a critique.

As Leticia alluded, after the evaluation of the students is over the students have the chance to each evaluate the teacher, expressing what they liked about the teacher and how the teacher can improve. One student explained: 'There was one time that a teacher was absent all the time. I told her, I said she was absent a lot when I did my evaluation ... she is not teaching anymore here, she left.' In this case, we found out later, the teacher was completely against the participatory evaluation system and decided to leave the school. However, another student told us how her critique of a teacher improved her practice: 'I told the teacher she had to respect us more in the classroom, that if she wanted us to respect her, she had to also respect us ... after this she was better.' The student perceived her feedback as having improved her teacher's classroom practice.

As for the teachers themselves, Marli said that she sees these evaluations in a positive light: 'I see it as an opportunity to grow, because critiques help you grow, they help you improve those things that you are not realizing that you are doing wrong.' Similarly, second-grade teacher Joélia said: Sometimes I explain things very quickly and there are students who are not able to follow, and they told me this ... I see this as an opportunity that you do not get in other schools. It is an opportunity for you to know what you are doing wrong and improve your teaching.

However, the physical education teacher, Marcelo, admitted that he initially thought that the student evaluation process was inappropriate.

I was very apprehensive, it was my first year and I did not understand, I thought it was absurd that a student would evaluate the teacher. I said, 'you are giving a lot of power to a child, it is not right. If I punish a student, he is going to evaluate me poorly.' But then I began to understand, that the students have to have the autonomy to evaluate us also. We have to learn to listen and accept critiques, even when they are negative.



The fact that all of the students and teachers in the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge must go through the same process of critique and self-critique seems to facilitate most of the school community's collective acceptance of this participatory evaluation process.

Once again, this relatively simple pedagogical intervention is a direct affront on the traditional organization of the public school system and the reproduction of capitalist values. One of the most important characteristics of the capitalist systems is the reduction of work to its 'exchange value' (Marx 1976), or the proportion a commodity is valued compared to another commodity. In other words, exchange value is how much a person can obtain for a commodity she or he possesses, which in most cases is her or his labor power. Students learn this practice in schools, exchanging their hard work for a grade on a test or report card. In contrast, in this educational model the emphasis is entirely on the 'use value,' or the inherent utility of the educational process, in terms of how this education contributes to students' individual and collective development. If students have difficulties, they are asked to take extra 'reinforcement' classes, not simply to advance to the next grade but, moreover, to gain the knowledge that will be necessary for their communities' futures. Thus, the value of knowledge is in its inherent use for the community.

### **Pedagogical challenges to neoliberalism: a constant struggle**

The portions of reality, work collectives, and participatory evaluation system are all pedagogical innovations for public schools, however, these initiatives are also directly connected to the MST's vision for broader social transformation. By linking disciplinary content to 'portions of reality,' the movement connects academic content to themes that touch on the most central aspects of the movement's political struggle, such as the fight for land, production of healthy foods, and rural culture. The student work collectives support the MST's goal of constructing workers' cooperatives throughout the Brazilian countryside. The idea of the 'study complexes' is to organically link between these three processes: contextualized learning, work, and self-governance. The participatory evaluation system is a rejection of the individualized and competitive system of evaluation, and instead is an attempt to create a society based on solidarity, where a collective process of critique and self-critique is a constant part of improving ourselves and each other. Despite the challenges and difficulties, the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge is directly connected to the MST's broader political and economic goals.

The Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge develops educational practices that represent an alternative form of schooling, connected to the struggle of workers in the countryside. This form of schooling provides a broad human formation, an active and interdisciplinary knowledge. In traditional schools, knowledge is a product that you sell and exchange; it is an end in itself, and because of this, the educational process becomes artificial, fractioned, and disconnected from life. In the itinerant school, teaching is seen as the transformation of knowledge into an active concept, or, in other words, connecting knowledge as a form of critical thinking and overcoming barriers. Students always have to understand themselves as socially situated and conscious of their possibilities and the direction of their actions. This type of education attempts to educate for democracy, participation, organization, critique, and autonomy. As Pistrak (2009, 31) writes:

It is necessary for the next generation to understand, in the first place, what is the nature of the class struggle currently being waged. In the second place, what are the spaces occupied by the

classes being exploited in this struggle. In the third place, what are the spaces that should be occupied by adolescents. And finally, everyone should know how, in their respective spaces, to fight for the destruction of useless [institutions], and substituting them with a new buildings [practices].

For the past 12 years, the students, teachers, and families in Camp Maila Sabrina have had to resist the attacks and threats to close the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge. Although this pedagogical proposal for schools in MST camps was approved by the Paraná State Education Council in 2003 under a sympathetic left-leaning government, right-wing politicians and the media constantly critique the schools as ideological institutions that contribute to the alienation and brainwashing of students. In 2011, when a more conservative governor took power in Paraná, the attacks against the itinerant schools intensified. The Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge often has to go months without receiving any state funding, and only functions because of the volunteer labors of the teachers. The national context also shifted to the right in 2016, with the ousting of Workers' Party (PT) president Dilma Rousseff and her replacement with the right-wing leader Michel Temer. These political shifts have led to more public attacks on social movements and public schooling throughout the country.

Nonetheless, as of the writing of this article, the itinerant schools have survived this political crisis. As Marlene Sapelli, one of the university collaborators who supports the MST's educational program in the itinerant schools, reflects:

The Itinerant Schools have already resisted the coup. The coup of Richa [the new governor], of Temer [the new president]. Of course, I think the present context is really bad for the Itinerant Schools. Because they already had nothing, and now they have even less. For example, this year there was a delay to contract teachers ... which means the teachers are working as volunteers. This will probably continue into May. But no one has left the school, you see? The schools have not closed. I think that the movement has learned how to defend the schools, to overcome these difficulties. I think the Itinerant Schools will survive, once again. Because this is not the first time they have been attacked ... Of course, this movement is difficult, but the struggle was never easy.

As Marlene suggests, it is a constant battle to defend the Itinerant School Paths of Knowledge, but it is likely that the school will continue to exist for the foreseeable future. This is because the dedication of the students, parents, and teachers to the school's pedagogical proposal is stronger than the financial incentives that typically motivate the educational process. The hope is that one day the families in the camp will win land rights and the itinerant school will become permanent.

## Conclusions

Over the past three decades, the MST has attempted to construct an educational proposal for the public school system that is connected to the movement's fight for land, agrarian reform, and social transformation. For the MST, this means building a socialist society that is just, egalitarian, autonomous, and based in solidarity. This vision is in direct contrast to the capitalist economic system, which is based on competition, individualism, and the logics of the free market. Multinational corporations have a big stake in the public education system, as schools are a central part of training (and disciplining) the future workforce. Thus, the MST's proposal for constructing itinerant schools – legally recognized public schools that are located in occupied encampments – is a direct threat to the global neoliberal

model. Moreover, the MST's attempt to transform these schools into institutions that help students learn to work collectively, participate in self-governance, critique and self-critique, and use knowledge to improve their community suggests that other types of non-capitalist educational practices are possible. The state reluctantly allows the movement to participate in these schools, despite the threats the schools pose to the established neoliberal economic and political order. This is what it means for a social movement to be part of the governance of public education: finding the limited space within the current public education system to develop pedagogical approaches that support, albeit in limited ways, the goals and values of an alternative economic, political, and social world.

There are several lessons that we can take from the particular case of the MST, when thinking about how to counter neoliberal educational reforms in other locations outside Brazil. The first lesson is that there are multiple, innovative, and diverse ways to organize schools. Often, it is hard to think outside the box about what a school can look like, because the current system is the only reality teachers and students have ever known. Therefore, practices like grading appear 'common sense':<sup>4</sup> how else would you assess students' progress? Nonetheless, there are multiple forms of evaluating student learning, with potentially more important outcomes than simply assessing a student's grasp of content knowledge. We need to be creative and proactive, not only critiquing the current neoliberal system but developing new educational practices and policies that promote alternative social values such as racial equality, economic solidarity, and participatory governance. However, it is also important for school educators to take seriously what the MST refers to as the 'socialization' or the teaching of disciplinary content, to provide working-class populations with the knowledge they need to become protagonists in their own struggles.

The second lesson is the importance of linking these educational interventions to a broader movement for social and political change. As Jean Anyon (2005, 178) has argued, 'educators are in an excellent position to build a constituency for economic and educational change in urban communities' due to their close relationship with parents and youth. This is just as true in poor, rural communities. However, teacher activism is often confined to the internal practices within the school itself, or, at most, broader educational policies or teacher contracts. Nonetheless, the difficulties that poor families face are economic and political, and education alone will never fully address the inequities in these political and economic realms. Educators and activists have to think of new pedagogical approaches that can contribute to increasing the minimum wage, building alternative economic enterprises, contesting the concentration of political power, or teaching students about direct, participatory democracy. This is also true for teachers' unions, which need to move beyond fights for higher salaries to broader social justice struggles. Making these connections is only possible if teachers and their unions are linked to social movements. In the case of the MST, movement activists become teachers and promote the goals of their movement within their school. However, even in locations where there is not already a well-organized social movement, educators and students can form broader coalitions that fight for affordable housing, the end of deportation, racial justice, free healthcare, and many other causes.

Finally, the case of the MST's educational initiatives suggests the importance of trans-national counter-hegemonic educational networks, which can help movements and people from different parts of the world learn about alternative educational practices. The MST's educational program is already a product of these transnational connections, as Brazilian activists drew on the experiences of Soviet and Cuban educators to build a pedagogical

proposal appropriate to their rural reality. Similarly, activists and educators can learn from the MST's experiences, not by simply imitating these practices but by drawing on them and adapting them to their own contexts. The neoliberal educational paradigm is powerful because it offers a series of 'best practices' that can be implemented globally, independent of local circumstances. Creating an educational system for a more economically and politically justice world cannot simply replicate this practice of importing other experiences. Rather, we need to learn from the successes and failures of concrete attempts to contest the neoliberal educational model, and creatively promote new initiatives and interventions in our schools. The MST's itinerant schools offer a powerful example of several pedagogical approaches that directly resist neoliberalism, which other movements can learn from, build on, and make their own.

## Notes

1. For a longer discussion of a Gramscian approach to the study of education and schooling, see Tarlau (2017a, 2017b).
2. The movement specifically draws on the educational experiences that developed in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, as a decade when there were lots of creative experiments in building a new socialist society. The movement acknowledges that after the 1930s this creativity was greatly diminished.
3. Mariano wrote all of his sections in Portuguese. Tarlau translated all of these sections. In addition, all quotes from books in Portuguese are Tarlau's translations.
4. They appear 'common sense' not in the Gramscian usage of the term as people's contradictory philosophy of the world, which always holds a kernel of good sense, but rather in the general usage of the term common sense as obvious or intuitive.

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