

Case Study – July 2022

Collaboration and Contestation: State Actors and MST Activists Reforming Rural Education

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Contents

Background Details	4
State Actors: Officials in the Ministry of Education	5
Mechanism of Opening: Federally Funded State Seminars and Advisory Committee	7
Social Actor: The MST Education Sector in Ceará.....	9
State Actors: Officials in the State Department of Education	12
Opposition: Regional State Officials and Local Communities	14
Outcomes: More Than a Decade of <i>Educação do Campo</i> in Ceará	16
References	19
Interview	20
Notes	21

Background Details

The *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Workers Movement, MST) is known around the world for its success redistributing land in Brazil. Less well known is the movement's struggle for the right to free primary, secondary, and tertiary education for all children, youth, and adults living in MST settlements and camps. In Brazil, many rural families have only limited access to schools. Additionally, in many rural areas where education is provided, school systems are dysfunctional, teachers frequently do not go to work, and there are very few resources and almost no administrative support (Plank 1996; Reimers 2000; Schwartzman 2004). Over the past thirty years, the MST has successfully pressured state and local governments to build hundreds of rural public schools in the countryside and on agrarian reform settlements. In addition, the MST has been able to offer literacy programs, vocational high school courses, teacher-training programs, bachelor degree programs, and other formal educational offerings to families living in settlements and camps. Sympathetic government actors within the Brazilian state have been critical for pushing forward these educational reform efforts, in addition to the movement's contentious political mobilizations (Tarlau 2019).

Importantly, the MST's struggle over education in areas of agrarian reform is a fight both for *access* (public schools built in MST settlements; educational programs offered specifically to activists) and for *control* (the influence MST activists have in schools and programs to implement their educational vision). The MST has set up regional educational collectives that work with local governments to coordinate teachers, students, and community members to promote better functioning schools and implement the movement's educational proposals, including initiatives such as curriculums on agroecology and student self-governance. However, in many areas of the country, state and local governments refuse to work with the MST and have banned MST activists from schools in their own communities. As this case study will illustrate, the MST has been able to participate in the co-governance of a parallel rural education system at both the federal level and in those states where local MST activists are able to occupy the space created by those national-level initiatives. Although the MST has been able to push forward some subnational educational policies based solely on local political relationships (e.g., in Rio Grande do Sul, see Tarlau 2019), since the early 2000s the federal government's recognition of the movement's educational proposal has become increasingly important for facilitating subnational openings.

This is a case study of a national education reform inspired by the MST, and its impact in the Brazilian northeastern state of Ceará. The case study spans from 2003 until the present and examines two levels of openings for educational policy reform—federal and state openings—and the interaction between these national and subnational processes. The national political situation during this period ranged from democratic with left-leaning presidents (2003-2016) to unsettled times with a right-leaning president (2016-2018) to an ultra-right conservative context and a president with fascist tendencies (2019-2022). In Ceará, the ideology of the state government during this period went from right-leaning (2003-2007) to left-leaning (2007-2022). Despite these shifting political contexts, in Ceará the MST has been able to participate in the co-governance of the public school system over more than a decade by taking advantage of multiple state openings. These openings include state convenings (e.g., of teachers, activists, and other educational stakeholders), state recognition of the MST as a legitimate partner, and tangible state resources (e.g., the financing of teacher training programs, covering costs to attend meetings for co-governance). To participate

in the co-governance of the rural school system, the MST has used a combination of collaborative and adversarial approaches, directly contesting claims that collaborative and contentious politics are dichotomous.

The data for this case study comes from twenty months of ethnographic research in Brazil between October 2010 and September 2015, as well as a year-long stay in Brazil from June 2016 to July 2017. Although I was no longer collecting data about MST-state relations during this latter visit, I continued to be in close contact with MST activists and I stayed abreast of major developments. Since July 2017, I have taken several trips back to Brazil and I continue to stay updated on the movement's educational programs through informal conversations with MST activists and news disseminated by the movement through emails and social media.

State Actors: Officials in the Ministry of Education

There are two sets of state actors that are critical to this story. The first are the national actors that were appointed to the Ministry of Education between 2004 to 2006. The second set of actors are the state officials responsible for rural education in the Ceará Department of Education. This first section will describe the state actors within the Ministry of Education.

Since the early 1980s, MST activists have experimented with alternative pedagogical approaches for public schools and other educational programs in their communities. It was only in the late-1990s that the movement began to frame these educational ideas as a national approach to rural education, what became known as *Educação do Campo* (Education of the Countryside).

At the national level, the first official recognition of this proposal occurred in April 2002, when the *Conselho Nacional de Educação* (National Education Advisory Board) passed the Operational Guidelines for *Educação do Campo* (*Resolução CNE/CEB 1 2002*). These guidelines require all national and subnational educational institutions “to recognize that schools in the countryside are defined by their connection to the local reality” including the previous knowledge of students and local communities' hopes for the future. In addition, the guidelines defend the right that populations in the countryside have to schools in their own communities—both primary and secondary education as well as technical and professional training—and for these schools to support collective work practices, social development, and economic justice.

Other components of the Operational Guidelines include the right to a specific curriculum for populations of the countryside, school calendars adapted to the needs of rural communities, teacher trainings specifically for teachers who work in the countryside, and democratic governance. Social movements are explicitly mentioned three times in the document as critical actors who have the right to participate in rural schools and other educational policy initiatives in the countryside.

Despite this important legal mandate, after the Operational Guidelines for *Educação do Campo* were passed in 2002, right-leaning President Fernando Henrique Cardoso took no further actions to institutionalize the guidelines. As several state officials described, the Operational Guidelines were “shelved.” Furthermore, there were no advocates for implementing the Operational Guidelines in

the Ministry of Education. As MST educational leader Edgar [Kolling](#) said, “For us the Ministry of Education was closed, there was no dialogue.”

The national government actors critical to this case study came to the scene in 2004. In 2002, left-leaning Luiz [Inácio](#) Lula da Silva won the presidential election, partially due to the support of rural social movements. This was an important moment of state opening, which facilitated social movements’ collective action. Immediately after President Lula took office, in January 2003, the MST joined with other rural social movements to organize three huge marches in Brasília. One of their major demands was the implementation of the Operational Guidelines for *Educação do Campo*. As Antonio [Munarim](#), who became the most important state actor pushing forward these guidelines, explained:

There were three huge marches in Brasília as rural social movements organized to bring their demands to the President. Among these demands was to take the Operational Guidelines out of the ‘shelf.’ These guidelines had been shelved for 1 year . . . the movements submitted a document that said “Lula, we want you to take the guidelines out of the shelf (*desengavete*), we want the guidelines to actually exist in practice.”

Although it was Lula’s election that opened up the possibility for social movements’ collective action, it was the pressure of these mobilizations that empowered federal officials to take action. Following these marches, President Lula agreed to create a permanent working group for *Educação do Campo*, which included the MST and other rural social movements. Then, in 2004, President Lula implemented a series of internal changes in the Ministry of Education that institutionalized the Operational Guidelines.

Most significantly, the President created a Secretary for Continual Education, Literacy and Diversity, which included a Department of Education for Diversity and Citizenship. Within this department there was a specific office for *Educação do Campo*. Furthermore, a Permanent Advisory Board for *Educação do Campo* was established, which could advise federal officials on the process of implementing the federal *Educação do Campo* guidelines (Ministry of Education 2004). The Advisory Board included representatives from all of the principal social movements, NGOs, and university partners that had pushed for *Educação do Campo* over the previous five years. This was another important state opening that empowered social movement activists to participate in the educational policy process.

This advisory board worked directly with Ministry of Education officials to do this work. The typical relationship between social movements and the state transformed, with the MST and their allies given an institutional space to engage with state actors. Thus, mass mobilization during a left-leaning presidential administration led to institutional changes in one of Brazil’s most important federal agencies, which had been previously closed, a huge opening from above for rural social movements over the next decade.

Two state officials were put directly in charge of the office for *Educação do Campo*, both of whom were sympathetic to the participation of rural social movements in the implementation of educational policy. [Armênio](#) Bello Schmidt was a long-time teacher union activist from the state of Rio Grande do Sul, affiliated with President Lula’s left-leaning Workers’ Party. He had been the president of the municipal teachers’ union for many years, and when the Workers’ Party won power in his municipality, he became the municipal Secretary of Education. Through the Workers’ Party, Schmidt had a direct relationship with [Tarso](#) Genro, a major Workers’ Party leader in Rio Grande do Sul who would eventually become Governor in 2011. In 2004 [Genro](#) became the Minister

of Education and he brought Schmidt with him, making him the Director of Diversity. Schmidt explained the significance of this new department:

When we arrived in the Ministry of Education there was not a single sector or department that focused on diversity. Students who are not in the normal age range for schools, the illiterate, the youth who drop out of school, blacks who are 50 percent of the population and face discrimination in school, the countryside. There was not a single office that worried about the specific issues of education in the countryside.

Although Schmidt did not have direct experience with rural social movements, his activism with the Workers' Party, his teacher unionism, and his position as Director of Diversity made him an advocate of *Educação do Campo*. Schmidt became the director of three offices dedicated to developing educational policies for black rural communities, indigenous peoples, and populations of the countryside.

University professor Antonio Munarim became the head of the office for *Educação do Campo*. Even more so than Schmidt, Munarim had a long history working with rural social movements. Since the 1970s he had been part of local participatory democracy initiatives in his rural town of Santa Catarina. In 1983, at the same moment as the oppositional union movement and the MST were being founded, he helped create a Popular Education Center that worked with local social movements. He became directly involved with several rural educational initiatives involving the MST and the rural union movement and he eventually entered a doctoral program and wrote his dissertation on these educational programs. Munarim was not only an advocate of the MST's educational program, he had a close relationship with many of the leaders of the movement. The MST's previous collective action had both contributed to the choice of Munarim for this position and directly empowered him to take action.

Mechanism of Opening: Federally Funded State Seminars and Advisory Committee

Schmidt and Munarim, as the Director of Diversity and head of the office for *Educação do Campo*, created a series of national programs to support *Educação do Campo*. These included *Licenciaturas em Educação do Campo* (Bachelor's degrees in *Educação do Campo*), a support program for rural schools with multi-grade classrooms, and adult education programs. However, as federal officials they did not have any direct control of the Brazilian public school system, which is administered by twenty-six state and more than five thousand municipal governments across the country. Therefore, as Schmidt explained, "the first moment was to sensitize, to mobilize the states and municipalities and the governors to pay attention to *Educação do Campo*. Because this discussion about *Educação do Campo* was only happening within the social movements." It was the decision of these federal actors to encourage subnational governments to implement the Operational Guidelines that would open up the possibility for more local collective action.

In order to encourage states and municipalities to implement the Operational Guidelines, Schmidt and Munarim organized seminars for *Educação do Campo* across Brazil¹, which took place in 2005 and 2006. Munarim was the main person in charge of organizing these state seminars. As he explained, Munarim made sure that at every seminar there were representatives from state and municipal secretaries of education, universities, and members of rural social movements, including the MST, rural labor federations, indigenous peoples, and *quilombolas* (maroon communities). This often meant going around state and municipal educational officials, and other power brokers, and directly inviting social movement leaders in each state to participate. Again, the explicit decision by federal actors to require the participation of local social movement activists would empower those activists to later take collective action around these initiatives. Professor Munarim explained that the seminars were often intense, as state and municipal Secretaries of Education from conservative political parties had never been in the same room as MST activists. Several meetings resulted in intense fighting, with government actors storming out of the meeting early.

The main goal for each of these seminars was to create a State Committee for *Educação do Campo*, which would be institutionally linked to the state Department of Education and include participants from members of rural social movements, NGOs, universities, and government agencies (similar to the *Educação do Campo* Advisory Board in the Ministry of Education). However, while some of these committees took on a life of their own at the state-level, in other states these committees fell apart within the year. In November of 2011, when I interviewed Antonio Munarim, he estimated that approximately fifteen state committees were still functioning.

The critical variable in the success of these committees was whether the MST or other rural social movements were strong enough to take advantage of these openings and consolidate these committees. These seminars increased the knowledge and awareness among municipal and state secretaries of education and civil society groups about *Educação do Campo*, allowing MST activists to more effectively make demands on state and municipal governments.

Thus, between 2005 and 2006, the Ministry of Education created an opening from above that allowed for more local collective action. The main mechanism of this opening was convening actors with a stake in the issue, who would otherwise not be invited to be part of these state- and municipal-level educational debates. This mechanism of opening—the convening power of the Ministry of Education—allowed the MST and other rural social movements to begin co-developing educational policy with state actors. Furthermore, the officials in the Ministry of Education mediated the interaction between social movements and subnational governments, convincing state officials of the importance and legal necessity of pushing forward the Operational Guidelines for *Educação do Campo*. Local activists were directly empowered by this state recognition of their legitimacy as important participants in the educational policy process. The Ministry of Education also paid for the seminars and other costs such as transportation, lodging, and food, to allow this policy process to take place.

The official goal of the state seminars was to implement and put into practice the 2002 Operational Guidelines. However, for state officials like Munarim, who was also a close ally and in direct contact with the MST, there was the additional goal of making sure social movements were a central part of this implementation process. The trigger of state action in this case was ideology—Munarim was an ally of rural social movements. Other state officials like Schmidt were less ideologically aligned with rural social movements, however, as someone broadly on the left and leading an institutional entity dedicated to promoting *Educação do Campo*, he also became an advocate of the MST's proposal. Thus, it was the creation of an office with goals aligned with the MST that became critical.

Although this office was a relatively precarious institutional space, the opening was big enough for the MST to mobilize and achieve its goals, as the story of educational reform in [Ceará](#) will illustrate.

Social Actor: The MST Education Sector in Ceará

In Ceará, the MST state education sector was the main social actor that led the education reform effort to implement *Educação do Campo*. The education sector is one of the dozen MST thematic sectors, which focus on specific issues within the movement (e.g., agricultural production, gender relations) and have representation in the state and national MST leadership collectives (known as directorates). The MST education sector includes MST activists across the state who are attempting to push forward the movement's educational program in schools, universities, and adult education and other non-formal programs outside of the school system. Many of these activists accessed secondary and higher education themselves through the formal educational access the MST won for their rural communities. Despite some regional variation, the MST's educational goals are broadly similar nationally. The MST National Education Sector, which includes representatives from all state education sectors, has published a wide number of publications outlining the philosophical and pedagogical components of the movement's educational proposal (MST 1996; 2005).

When the Ministry of Education organized a State Seminar on *Educação do Campo* in Ceará in 2005, Munarim made sure the MST state education sector was invited to participate. The seminar was a four-day-long event in which participants read the Operational Guidelines for *Educação do Campo*, discussed what they meant, and planned actions for their implementation. It was out of this first seminar in 2005 that the Ceará Committee for *Educação do Campo* was born. The state government passed an ordinance for the creation of the committee, which would include a combination of government, university, and civil society representatives. The MST immediately became one of the main leaders on the committee, despite the fact that before this moment the MST had no connections to the state government. MST leader Maria de Jesus Santos remembered,

It was an important articulation of various social movements . . . We had a debate within the [MST] education sector and we decided that we had to make sure that movements of the countryside had as much influence in the committee as institutional members . . . it is even in the bylaws of the committee, that this relationship is equal.

As described earlier, the MST's ability to participate in this seminar was an important state opening that would facilitate subsequent mobilizations to follow through on the educational policy demands.

Slowly, the conception of education in rural areas began to shift in the state Department of Education—at least among the government officials involved in these initiatives. For example, after the state seminar the Department of Education published a document that states,

Educação do Campo is a political and pedagogical conception that is intended to create a more dynamic link between human beings and the production of their social conditions. *Educação*

do Campo relates to the land and the environment, and respects the populations of the forest, fishing communities, miners, agricultural workers, cattle ranchers, hunters, and rivers.²

This government document shows that even at this initial stage the proposal for *Educação do Campo* was openly linked to an alternative form of social and economic development in the countryside.

The Ceará state seminar took place during the government of Lúcio Alcântara of the right-leaning Social Democracy Party (PSDB). Why did a right-leaning governor support these initiatives? According to one state Department of Education official, Claudia Avelar, “He was not very open, but the Ministry of Education, Munarim, they were pushing this so much in the state.” The Secretary of Education at that time, Sophia Lerche, also explained the importance of the funding that came with this state-federal partnership. “When we came to power our state was in debt, we had taken out loans that needed to be repaid . . . we were always looking for outside resources. The question was education, not partisanship, but it was true that our government was always in opposition to the federal government.” Thus, despite opposing political parties, the Ministry of Education’s *Educação do Campo* initiatives and the funding that came with it pushed forward these educational policies in Ceará. After the first state seminar was over, Avelar was chosen to be the point person for *Educação do Campo*, the liaison between the Ceará state Department of Education and the Ministry of Education.

In March of 2006, the Ministry of Education asked Avelar to organize a second Seminar on *Educação do Campo*. Munarim came from Brasília to give the opening talk, which emphasized the historical connection between the *Educação do Campo* proposal and the mobilization of social movements:

The Secretary of Diversity in the Ministry of Education was born from social movements . . . public policies are only created through the struggle of the social movements, if there is not continual mobilization and oversight by organized civil society, these initiatives will just be government programs [not public policies].³

Munarim’s recognition of the historical role of social movements in overseeing public policies increased the MST education collective’s influence during the seminar. On the second day of the seminar, participants worked in small groups to develop a document about their conception of schooling in the countryside. The final document of the seminar states schools in the countryside should

rescue the identity and culture of the populations, respect different academic calendars, be dedicated to human formation, be part of a class project, be part of the dynamic of the countryside, prepare students for constructing a different society, have disciplines related to the reality of the countryside, have a character of critical reflection not training, be based in the reality of students in the countryside, produce different types of knowledges, work with the memory and cultural resistance of the populations, be preoccupied with the self-esteem of the student, strengthen the construction of identity through valuing students’ culture, activism, and self-esteem . . .⁴

This conception of *Educação do Campo* in Ceará is almost verbatim to many of the MST’s own educational documents (MST 1996), which illustrates the direct influence of the MST education sector during this seminar and the subsequent institutionalization of the movement’s ideas.

In December of 2006, the Committee for *Educação do Campo* organized a teacher-training course for teachers working in rural areas. For five days hundreds of teachers studied the theoretical foundations of *Educação do Campo*, listened to MST activists describe their experiences implementing this educational proposal, analyzed the relationship between *Educação do Campo* and issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and age, and discussed the possibilities of incorporating *Educação do Campo* into the state curriculum in Ceará.⁵ All of these new discussions and debates were moving forward, with the institutional support of the federal Ministry of Education.

In January of 2007, a mere week after this *Educação do Campo* teacher training, Cid Gomes of the left-leaning Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) came to power. With this experience of state-sponsored seminars and a new, potentially more sympathetic government, the MST went on the offensive. The movement's collective mobilization proved critical to moving forward the *Educação do Campo* proposals. As Maria de Jesus Santos explained, although the Committee for *Educação do Campo* was an important space, it was not enough. She said, "The problem with committees and advisory boards is that their major role is that of information and public relations; it is only the struggle that wins victories in the end."

With this orientation in mind, the Ceará state leadership organized a massive protest for May 1, 2007, with seven hundred people occupying the State Department of Agrarian Development and demanding a meeting with the Governor ("1º de maio: Sem Terra fazem ocupação no Ceará" 2007). After six days the secretary of the Department of Education and Governor Gomes met with the movement and agreed to many of their demands ("Sem-terra ocupam sede do Incra" 2007). Among these demands was the construction of sixty-four state public schools on MST settlements, including ten high schools. Up until that point, there was not a single municipal or state high school on any MST settlement. Consequently, the youth living in MST settlements had to migrate to the city after finishing primary school. Constructing high schools on MST settlements was a top priority for the MST education sector in Ceará.

That same year the Ministry of Education created the Plan of Articulated Actions that allowed states and municipalities to apply for resources to construct new public schools. The Ceará Department of Education had submitted a request to this program, and the federal government approved funding for the construction of eleven new public high schools in Ceará ("Ceará" 2008). Governor Gomes agreed to build four of these eleven new schools on MST settlements. As MST activist Erivando Barbosa said,

We organized a huge mobilization, we brought families from our settlements, we occupied the Department of Agrarian Development, and in our fight for agricultural loans for our settlements we also demanded schools... The Department of Agrarian Development called the Department of Education and said the MST is here, they are demanding schools, what do we do? They responded, the Ministry of Education is going to fund the construction of eleven schools, we can give four of these eleven schools to the MST. It was an agreement, a negotiation.

According to this account, it was both the MST's mobilizations and another opening from above—the Ministry of Education's funding of a dozen new high schools—that allowed for the MST's successful negotiation with the Governor. Similarly, Maria de Jesus Santos explained, "We demanded new schools and the Governor would never have agreed. But the federal government created an education program, the Plan of Articulated Actions, to build new schools. Cid was very smart; he took advantage of this opportunity to meet our demand. The schools he constructed on our settlements were all from the federal government." Valotenia Barbalho Gomes, who worked in

the Secretary of Education during this period, added: “For Cid Gomes the question is political, the government needs to have a good relationship with the MST.” Thus, two different state openings—the federal government’s financing of new schools and a more ideologically-aligned state Governor—in addition to MST’s mobilizations that pressured the state to take action, resulted in the creation of four new high schools on MST settlements.

State Actors: Officials in the State Department of Education

Although the MST won commitments to build high schools in their settlements, the fight for control required another cycle of mobilizations and openings from above, this time at the subnational level. The state Department of Education, under pressure from the Governor to negotiate with the MST, created a new office for *Educação do Campo* that would oversee the four schools. A Secretary of Continual Education, Literacy, Diversity and Inclusion was created, and within it a Department of Diversity that would oversee the *Educação do Campo* office.

This new institutional structure in many ways mirrored the institutional changes that had happened in the Ministry of Education in 2004. Nohemy Ibanez, a woman with decades of experience working in rural areas and on MST settlements, was put in charge of this department. Ibanez had been doing research in rural areas of the state since the 1980s, and she had even spent 9 months living in an MST settlement working with female farmers. She had personal and long-standing relationships with the movement. She was also a big advocate of the concept of *Educação do Campo*, as she explained:

What we had before was rural education. There was an understanding that people were going to leave the countryside... I think that today the idea of *Educação do Campo* emerged from a different optic, that we have to develop the countryside. The social movements in the countryside have underscored the possibility of people staying in the countryside, that there is the possibility of improving the life of the small farmer, to produce better quality food, more effectively, with more efficiency and technologies. The social movements, principally the MST, showed me that first it is possible to produce food and stay the countryside, and second it is possible to have a different type of school.

Ibanez admired the MST’s social and educational project and admitted that her vision of rural schools had been greatly influenced by the movement. The movement’s previous educational and agricultural initiatives, won through contentious protest, had inspired Ibanez to take a leadership role and advocate for *Educação do Campo*.

As the Director of Diversity, Ibanez worked to support the MST to ensure that the four new high schools in their agrarian reform settlements were designated as *escolas do campo* (schools of the countryside). This designation meant that the schools were legally recognized as different from urban schools, with the right to a curricular and organizational approach more appropriate to the reality of families in the countryside. Another state official appointed to oversee these schools, Ana

Cristina de Oliveira Rodrigues, explained, “The government makes a distinction between these *escolas do campo* and the 46 other state schools in rural areas. Those are rural schools and our *Educação do Campo* office has nothing to do with them.” This agreement to designate the four high schools as *escolas do campo* became a formal institutional arrangement. Multiple government policies were passed, which both promoted the idea of *Educação do Campo* and the inclusion of the MST in overseeing these schools. For example, the Ceará Department of Education website states:

The state Department of Education . . . recognizes the struggle of social movements and unions of the countryside to guarantee access to a quality high school education for the populations of the countryside. We support this through the construction of new high schools in rural regions and in settlements . . . These schools are denominated as *escolas do campo* due to their pedagogical proposal to connect the curriculum to the social, economic, and cultural reality of these population. The goal is for schools to reflect about the identity and culture of peasant communities. The actions that are being developed in these schools take place through a continual dialogue with the school principals, teachers, other school staff, and with the MST Education sector [emphasis added] (“*Educação do Campo*” n.d.).

This excerpt illustrates the degree to which the state embraced both the proposal for *Educação do Campo* and the MST’s co-governance of the new high schools.

This opening in Ceará was a consequence of a more left-leaning political context, the MST’s contentious protest, and the federal government’s financial support. The actual officials in the state Department of Education, including Ibanez and her team, were also essential. However, it was the MST’s previous mobilizations that had facilitated their appointments. As Erivando Barbosa explained,

We were able to get people in the state Department of Education that already had a relationship with the MST, they even researched the movement. For example, the person who was appointed to head the department was Nohemy, she is a person that is very close to the movement.

Similarly, MST activist Irineuda Lopes said,

In the state Department of Education we have people that know our proposal, and this makes a difference. If there are people who do not know the proposal or do not want to implement it then it is more complicated. . . . There is a big opening (*abertura muito grande*) . . . Like Nohemy herself, we have a very open dialogue with her. We know that the state is the state and the movement is the movement, but there has to be this opening. The people that are there facilitate this dialogue.

A concrete example of how this state opening became critical for the MST to advance its educational proposal was in the appointment of the high school principals. The MST wanted its own activists to become the principals of these schools, however, Brazilian law requires an open selection process. The movement worked with the state Department of Education to create a job description for these positions that required a bachelor’s degree in Pedagogy of Land—a degree that only MST activists could have obtained.⁶ When I asked MST activist Erivando Barbosa why the Governor allowed for the MST to have so much control, he responded: “This decision was not made by Cid [Gomes], it was made at the level of the state Department of Education, with the technical team working there. We were close to this team and they made a big effort to find a breach in the

law that allowed for a special selection process for choosing the principles of the *escolas do campo*." Thus, with the help of these state reformers, the MST was able to ensure that all of the principals of the four high schools were from the movement's education sector and deeply familiar with the movement's educational proposal. The movement's previous mobilization for college degrees in the Pedagogy of Land had ensured that this specialization was possible and legitimate.

In addition, the state Department of Education allowed the MST to develop three new curricular subjects for these high schools: 1) Organization of Work and Production Techniques; 2) Projects, Studies, and Research; and 3) Communal Social Practices. Each of these disciplines represented a core component of the movement's educational program.

The Organization of Work and Production Techniques was a way for the students to practice agroecological farming methods. When I visited the *escolas do campo* in 2011, all of the high schools had experimental farms—fields cleared near the schools for the students to practice farming. Ibanez spoke enthusiastically about these farms: "The idea of the farms is that they can be a laboratory for students to develop new production practices and technologies, like soil correction, and to illustrate to themselves and to their families that it is possible to produce from an agroecology perspective, more sustainably." The state Department of Education hired agronomists for each school to oversee these student farming initiatives.

The Projects, Studies, and Research discipline allowed students to develop their own research projects and engage in primary data collection in their community. The emphasis was on putting theory into practice as an ongoing initiative throughout the entire school year. The Communal Social Practices discipline was an opportunity for students to practice and refine their participation in the governance of their school. The MST's vision was for the students to govern the *escolas do campo* collectively, through student base nuclei, class coordinating collectives, and school-wide coordinating bodies. By creating a discipline focused on communal social practices, students had time to learn and practice the difficult process of self-governance. This class also offered the students an opportunity to study the theorists that inspired the MST's educational approach, such as Paulo Freire, Anton Makarenko, and Moisey Pistrak (Tarlau 2019).

Together, these three new disciplinary offerings in agricultural production, research, and social practices created the structural changes necessary for the MST education sector to prefigure the major components of the movement's educational vision in the rigid state school system. All of these pedagogies directly contributed to the strength of the MST itself in these local communities

Opposition: Regional State Officials and Local Communities

There was of course a lot of opposition to the MST's co-governance of the public schools, especially at the regional level where local education officials knew nothing about *Educação do Campo* and were generally critical of the MST's agrarian reform struggle. For example, in one case the head of a regional educational office, Pedro, told the MST that he was not going to let the new high school

be built in an MST settlement. According to Simone Ramos de Brito, the MST activist who became the principal of the school,

Pedro wanted the new school to be located in the city. He knew the school would have a beautiful infrastructure and he wanted it in a location with easier access. There was a huge conflict and he threatened 'this school is not going to be located in the middle of nowhere [*mata*, literally, woods]'

Although I never talked to Pedro, one of his colleagues in the regional educational office explained:

Initially we had wanted to build the school in another area because we were thinking about the entire region. There were lots of communities in the region who needed high school access and if the school was built in the [agrarian reform] settlement it would be difficult to enroll these students. These other families do not agree with the settlement school . . . they think it will prepare their kids to be farmers. (Interview #1)

The MST families went to the streets to protest Pedro's decision, claiming that he did not want the school in the settlement because he saw the countryside as inferior to urban areas. Eventually, Ibanez in the state Department of Education told Pedro that the MST would decide the school's location, as this had been an agreement with the governor. The MST protest and negotiations with the governor were more influential than the concerns of this local state official. This had a long-term effect in the region, as once built, schools are hard to move.

Other state officials were less vocal about their opposition to the MST's participation in the public schools; however, they still expressed many doubts. For example, one regional educational official told me, "*Educação do Campo* is necessary because of the diversity of the people in the countryside." However, she admitted that, "we are also running a risk. We run the risk of having too much diversity . . . University programs only for people in the settlements, this is discrimination" (Interview #2). I saw another regional educational official during her visit to one of the high schools. She was generally enthusiastic about the school. However, at one point after a coffee break she whispered to me, "Sometimes I wonder if all of the students' parents really identify with the struggle, if they really want all of this ideology . . . maybe they want to leave the countryside."⁷ Similarly, another regional official stated her nominal support of the MST while also expressing the concern that, "Sometimes the principals obey the MST more than the state and I have to tell them 'look, the schools belongs to state not to the MST . . . the state pays for the school'" (Interview #3). This official also commented to me that she thought the MST was a "bit radical, but thank God we are managing to work together." All of these statements suggest that these regional state officials might not be so sympathetic to MST participation if the movement did not continually mobilize or if there was not an advocate for the movement's educational proposal high up in the bureaucratic hierarchy.

Finally, another potential opposition force is the families themselves that attend these high schools. Although the MST has been able to maintain the support of most families living in these communities, there are always parents that are critical of the MST's educational proposal, preferring that their children receive a 'normal' education that will prepare them for a better life in the city. This is the most dangerous type of opposition to the MST's educational program, because even pro-reform advocates like Nohemy Ibanez become critical of the MST if families no longer

support the movement. For example, while the majority of my interview with Ibanez consisted of her expressing enthusiastic support for *Educação do Campo*, at moments she also acknowledged these doubts:

We try to have a dialogue with the MST. But we also believe that the schools are not the property of the MST. The schools are for the people who live in these communities. The schools are a tool of the community and the MST is welcome to participate, but there are limits to their appropriation of the schools, these are not schools of the MST . . . We realize the principals and some of the teachers are MST leaders . . . and the MST has been very influential in the writing of the school mission statements, but we need the community to take ownership of the schools. Not just the MST education sector . . .

Ibanez's distinction between the MST and the community is telling, because while the MST claims to represent these agrarian reform settlements, there is sometimes a divide between the movement's leadership and the settlement families. The MST's legitimacy in the eyes of the state—even state reformers—depends on the movement's ability to garner the allegiance of the families it claims to represent. If the MST is not able to do so, the state might draw a distinction between the 'movement' and the 'community,' and put limits on the MST's participation.

Outcomes: More Than a Decade of *Educação do Campo* in Ceará

This case has illustrated rounds of virtuous circles of social movement activists and state actors mutually empowering each other's efforts to push forward an alternative education reform effort for rural schools. Importantly, since 2016 the political climate at the federal level has shifted rapidly to the right, ending many of the policies and programs that had previously supported *Educação do Campo*. Nonetheless, over more than a decade, between 2010 and 2022, the MST's educational reform efforts in Ceará grew rapidly. In 2014, the Workers' Party won the gubernatorial race in Ceará in an alliance with the previous governor Cid Gomes. In 2015, the Ceará state Department of Education agreed to construct eight additional high schools in MST settlements. These eight new high schools were all constructed between 2016 and 2019. All of these schools are considered part of the network of *escolas do campo*, with the right to a diversified curriculum and organizational practices appropriate for populations of the countryside. Importantly, the construction of these new high schools was during a right-wing national shift and the elimination of all federal *Educação do Campo* programs. Thus, although federal openings were initially critical for the MST to push forward *Educação do Campo* in Ceará, by 2016 the movement was advancing these reforms only with state-level openings.

What were the outcomes for state actors? At the federal level, both Antonio Munarim and Armênio Schmidt left the Ministry of Education before they saw the mass implementation of *Educação do Campo*. Nonetheless, their actions between 2004 and 2006 were critical for setting the groundwork for state-level educational reforms. The Department of Diversity and the office for *Educação do Campo*, which they both helped to create, ceased to effectively function in May 2016 and no

longer existed in 2019. However, at the state level, the Ceará Department of Diversity continues to function, with Nohemy Ibanez the director of that department. Overseeing the *escolas do campo* and promoting an alternative educational program in these schools continues to be one of the most important components of her job. This suggests that the institutionalization of progressive reforms at *multiple* state levels—national and subnational—with *multiple* state reformers may be critical for sustaining power shifts over several decades.

The outcomes for the social actors have been significant. The MST state education sector in Ceará now has a network of high schools in twelve of its settlements, which not only allow youth to stay in the countryside while studying, but also offer employment and resources to the local community. Furthermore, these schools help young people prefigure the types of social practices the MST hopes to promote on a larger scale in the future, including student self-governance, agroecological food production, and the integration of manual and intellectual labor. The MST education sector continues to be active in the co-governance of this network of twelve high schools. This has increased the MST's regional capacity, as many of the teachers who come to teach in these schools, even those who are not initially members or supporters of the movement, become advocates of the MST's educational proposal. Teachers learn about the movement's educational approach through their daily interaction with the principals and other MST leaders in the schools, as well as through annual "Pedagogical Seminars" funded by the state Department of Education and organized by the MST education sector. Although these collaborative MST-state relationships in Ceará could shift with a new governor intent on attacking the movement, for now these relationships seem quite stable.

Multiple cycles of state reformist-society interactions led to these outcomes. The initial role of the federal government was critical for the Ceará Department of Education to recognize *Educação do Campo* as a legitimate program for rural education and recognize the MST as a legitimate actor in the co-governance of this reform. Drawing on this legitimacy, and taking advantage of a left-leaning state government that came to power, the MST education sector in Ceará mobilized its base to demand something concrete: high schools with a special designation as *escolas do campo* in their settlements. This demand was possible because of another opening from above—a federal program to construct new high schools. This began a new cycle of state reformist-society interaction at the state level, with the appointment of several sympathetic reformers in the state Department of Education to oversee these new schools.

MST activists worked closely with these state officials while continuing to mobilize and protest when necessary to push forward their demands. This combination of protest and negotiation with state reformers in the Department of Education has continued for the past decade. One turning point was the MST's occupation of the state Department of Agrarian Development, which led to the Governor's agreement to construct four new high schools in MST settlements. Another turning point was the appointment of Nohemy Ibanez in the state Department of Education, a state reformer who although not a total MST ally, has continued to support the implementation of the MST's educational proposal. The interaction between the MST and the state reformers in the Department of Education appears to be one of mutual empowerment as they enhance each other's ability to achieve their goals.

These types of relationships between the MST and state reformers are common throughout the country and have likely influenced thousands of schools and hundreds of thousands of students. In other words, although Ceará represents one of the most successful cases of MST co-governance at the state level, it is not a total outlier. For example, similar educational policies and extensive, collaborative relationships between government officials and MST and state actors have developed

in the state school systems in Paraná and Rio Grande do Sul and at least one municipal school system in Pernambuco (Tarlau 2019).

The long-term sustainability of these reforms cannot be analyzed in isolation. For example, MST once had some of their strongest state education programs in Rio Grande do Sul. However, a long-term attack on the movement by the Governor between 2007 and 2010 led to the destruction of many of these initiatives. Importantly, this attack on the movement's schools took a political toll, as the MST mobilized against these attacks and the Governor was subsequently condemned by many important national political leaders, contributing to her loss in the next election. Perhaps for these reasons, in Paraná the MST has been able to sustain participation in the state public schools for several decades, despite the different ideological leanings of the state governors. This suggests that even unsuccessful social mobilizations might be critical for sustaining reform efforts in other locations as subnational actors weigh the political costs of shutting down reform initiatives with ample local support.

In all of these cases, institutionalizing the movement's educational proposal while sympathetic state actors were in power was critical to the long-term sustainability of reform efforts. The education reforms in Ceará have survived three years of an ultra-right reactionary federal government. This is because when the stars aligned state and civil society actors in Ceará pushed forward reforms through legal decrees and new educational institutions. Once implemented, even the more skeptical state officials have to assess the costs of reversing laws, terminating departments, and closing schools. In Ceará, the mutually reinforcing relationships between sympathetic state-level actors and movement activists, as well as the MST's frequent return to contentious politics, keeps rural education reforms alive and flourishing.

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Interview #2: Regional education official, interview by Rebecca Tarlau, November 23, 2011, Fortaleza.

Interview #3: Regional education official, interview by Rebecca Tarlau, September 14, 2011, Fortaleza.

Notes

- 1 The only state where a seminar for Educação do Campo did not take place was São Paulo.
- 2 Secretaria de Educação do Estado do Ceará.
- 3 Secretaria de Educação do Estado do Ceará, "Síntese do III Seminário Estadual de Educação do Campo."
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 This information is taken directly from the program for the teacher training.
- 6 This was a bachelor degree program specifically created for people living in area of agrarian reform and funded through the Program for Education in Areas of Agrarian Reform (PRONERA). See Tarlau 2019 for a more detailed explanation.
- 7 Field notes, November 2011.

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