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## The popular education in Rio Grande do Norte (1948-1964)

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### Abstract

This paper studies movements of education and popular culture that occurred in the State of Rio Grande do Norte, between the years 1948-1964, a period of democratic validity. This context facilitated the expression of the Catholic Church, under the guidance of the Archdiocese of Christmas and progressive sectors of the Catholic Action, created in 1958, an experience in education and popular culture literacy by radio to the rural environment, the radio schools, then Base Education Movement (MEB). Also in Natal in 1961, a movement of popular education, the responsibility of the Municipality, called "Campaign standing on the ground also learn to read" and meant an innovative experience in education, with great popular participation, facing the same poorest sections of the population. These two experiments have achieved a significant number of the population, developing, beyond literacy an awareness- pedagogical action, representing moments of liberation, progressive quest for a more just and humane society.

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### 1. Introduction

The movements of popular education and culture, which occurred in the State of Rio Grande do Norte in the 1950s and early 1960s, happened in a period of relative democratic opening in our country. The validity of the democratic state in Brazil (1945-1964) led to the growth and organization of civil society, leading to the emergence of mobilizations in favor of structural reforms for the country, denominated base reforms, necessary for the economic and social development.

This historical context facilitated the expression of the Catholic Church, under the guidance of the Archdiocese of Natal and of the progressive sectors of the Catholic Action, created, in 1958, an experience in education and popular culture of literacy by radio, focused on rural areas, denominated Radio Schools. The expansion and continuity of this

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experience led to the creation of the Movement of Basic Education (MEB), which pushed the boundaries of the State of Rio Grande do Norte, affecting much of the country in areas considered the poorest, with high illiteracy rates.

Within the civil society, secular, political factions, progressive and nationalist, elected during that democratic process in expansion, favored the emergence of other movements of popular education and culture. In Natal, for example, in 1961, a movement of popular education emerged under the responsibility of the Municipality, called “Campaign standing on the ground also learns to read” and meant an innovative experience in education, with a great popular participation, aimed for the poorest sections of the population of the city of Natal.

These two experiments have achieved a significant part of the population, developing, beyond literacy, an awareness-pedagogical action. Shortly thereafter, in 1963, occurred in the city of Angicos, in the backcountry of Rio Grande do Norte, promoted by the State Government, an experiment in popular education known as The 40 hours of Angicos. In this city, the educator Paulo Freire applied on a larger scale, for the first time, his educational system. Until then, the system was designed and implemented in small groups. At that moment, to apply it on a larger scale, the educator could consolidate it, resizing and adjusting it to the literacy needs of the poorest sectors of the population. These experiences lost, with the coup d’état of 1964, their strength, because they were severely repressed. The new government had imposed a new-old order.

In this research, we have worked with the first two movements: the Radio Schools/ MEB and Campaign “standing on the ground also learns to read”. We have defined our study on these two movements because they consisted of a more lasting experience, covering a larger share of the state population. The experience of Angicos, despite the future developments, had a brief existence; its action was limited to the city of Angicos not generating greater impact on the literacy rate of the state. In both movements chosen, we decided to work the process of teacher training, instructional materials for reading used in literacy, observing the book, booklet, among other educational materials, also highlighting the content transmitted in various reading activities, without forgetting that, for the poorest, the school is the only reading space. The study is limited by the post-war period until 1964, the year when the coup d’état occurred, because these movements were smitten, as said before, losing its power or even being canceled, as was the case of the Campaign “standing on the ground also learns to read”.

## **2. The Radio Schools**

The radio schools emerged within a larger movement, developed by the Archdiocese of Natal, called Movement of Natal. This movement emerged as an unfolding of the problems caused by the Second World War and by the phenomenon of cyclical droughts in northeastern Brazil. With the outbreak of the war and especially because of the geographical position occupied by the city of Natal, on the way of troops in transit to Dakar (Africa), the Office of Anti-Air Defense was installed, in 1942, in the nearby town of Parnamirim, and thereafter, “... the city, in addition to receiving the troops in transit, hosts a large numbers of Americans, because Natal had come to constitute a field for the adaptation to the tropical climate” (Paiva et al, 2009, p. 25). There were times when the city hosted about 10,000 soldiers, a period in which it had about 50 million inhabitants. This fact demanded labor for domestic service, construction, bars, hotels, nightclubs, attracting people from across the region, for these new jobs, particularly in rural areas plagued by the drought.

The end of the war, which caused the withdrawal of U.S. troops, produced a severe social crisis in the city, marked by problems resulting from drought. People, who had been attracted by the possibility of employment, were unemployed in large part, generating a high level of panhandling and other typical problems of crisis moments. The Archdiocese of Natal, then, initiated a series of actions to combat these problems, occupying a place that would be up to federal, state and municipal governments. These actions initially limited to the city of Natal, extending soon after to rural areas, with the creation of the Office of Rural Assistance (SAR) in 1948. Among activities such as shelter to abandoned children, creation of social centers, rural missions, holiday weeks, cooperatives, among others, the Archdiocese of Natal, with the adjuvant action of the Catholic Action, introduced another activity that was the literacy for youth and adults.

Taking as parameter the activities of evangelization and education by radio observed by D. Eugenio de Araujo Sales, the Auxiliary Bishop of Natal, in Sutanteza (Colombia), it was initiated into the Movement of Natal, the

education through the radio, with the creation called the Radio Schools. These schools, different from the movement of *Sutanteza*, had an organized reception. They were primarily intended for the people who lived in the countryside. Its constitution was under the guidance of local parishes and the infrastructure was responsibility of the communities where the schools were located. At the beginning, the Church supplied the radio and the electric battery, that could be rechargeable, and then the radios became more modern and started operating on batteries, so the students and the community people held parties, task forces and money for the small expenses such as batteries for the radio, kerosene for lamps, chalk.

There was a large participation of the entire community. The students also cooperated bringing objects from their homes to sit – such as benches, stools, because the classrooms functioned wherever possible, what could be the home of the monitor, the rectories, or any available room that existed in the community. Schools started in September 1958 with literacy classes for youth and adults.

In 1961, with the expansion of the schools, it was introduced a new series and so on until, in 1963, the first five grades of primary education. The classes had the duration of 45 minutes and were broadcast daily by the Issuer for Rural Education, radio that belongs to the Archdiocese of Natal. The movement initially reached 69 schools and, in 1963, the year that a further expansion occurred, these schools were expanded and reached a total of 1,414 and 26,863 students.

Until 1961, the experience of the Radio Schools was the responsibility of the Archdiocese of Natal, through the SAR, and was restricted to the Rio Grande do Norte. After the Second Meeting of Bishops of the Northeast (1959) held in Natal, the bishops present suggested, in the Declaration of the Bishops of the Northeast, result of the meeting, to the then president, Juscelino Kubitschek, the expansion of the Radio Schools to the entire Northeast. That fact was realized later, on the occasion of the first meeting of the Basic Education, in Aracaju (SE), in December of 1960. In this meeting, the CNBB initiated talks with the elected president - although not yet sworn in, Jânio Quadros to expand these schools. In contrast, “[...] the CNBB proposed itself to structure the existing efforts through a Movement to coordinate the common action. The activities of the Radio Schools of the Diocese, along with the sector of Basic Education of RENECE, would become a new organism: the Movement of Basic Education (MEB).” (SPEYER, 1976, p. 6).

Yet in 1961 the Movement of Basic Education (MEB), was established by Decree No. 50,370, of March of 1961, signed by the President Quadros, which provided, through an agreement between the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) and CNBB, the funding of this project for five years of basic education. The agreement assumed the installation of 15,000 radio schools in the north, northeast and center-west of the country, considered underdeveloped regions. With the signing of this agreement, the MEB started. After the MEB, the radio schools of Natal took a new direction and became part of this new organism, which was linked to CNBB, although it was still organically linked to the Archdiocese of Natal. The national coordination of the MEB was subordinate to the Church/CNBB, but had the active participation of lay people, particularly those linked to the Catholic university youth (JUC), Section of the Catholic Action.

The radio schools were based on a tripod: speaker-teachers, monitors and radio.

The speaker-teachers were arrayed among youth who had a teacher training and participated, almost always, of the social activities of the Archdiocese of Natal. The first speaker-teacher was also a teacher of the Normal School of Natal and had some knowledge on radio technics for education by radio. The inaugural class, taught by the mentioned teacher, aired on September 20th, of 1958. Later, in February 1961 and in December of the same year, with the expansion of the schools, this teacher invited two students of the Normal School to participate as speaker-teachers of the educational experiment.

These three teachers led the work of the radio broadcast of classes throughout the time limits of this study. The last two teachers received in-service training, because there was no time to conduct more appropriate training, the activities were happening while the speaker-teachers learned how to deal with the new situation.

With the entry of the MEB, the training of the pedagogical staff became a target of greater importance. The National Team of the MEB performed supervisory visits and, at that time, there were discussions, debates, readings of texts with theoretical-philosophical deepening and planning of activities, with review and exchange of experiences. The speaker- teachers were also responsible for the preparation and transmission of the classes that had the form of script, because of the language of radio.

The monitors were set up in the large motor movement. Many were just literate and, in general, participants of the Catholic Action and other movements of the Church. They played a volunteer work, without pay. These young people lived in the parishes where the school was, or would be installed. They were usually chosen by the local priest, who took into account their leadership skills and the requirement to have a minimum of literacy. So they could take this educational function, the monitors participated of trainings, or other activities such as study days, courses. These educational activities were held under the coordination of the Central Staff, sort of techno-pedagogical staff who coordinated all the activities of teaching and schools running, and were held in conjunction with members of other sectors of the SAR in Natal.

The monitors were responsible for boosting the lessons provided by the speaker-teachers, by the Issuer of Rural Education, and were also responsible for handling the radio in the schools. In remote locations, wilderness, there was a monitor stimulating classes of the radio schools. The training received, was initially a conversation to know the daily life of the community where he resided, from that information, the knowledge was broadened to a more general information about the state, country, other countries, placing him in this reality; then the speaker-teachers taught classes with didactic-pedagogic content and information on the operational functioning of the school, such as the handling of the radio, license, frequency control, among others (PAIVA, 2009).

The reading book, "Educate to build" (1964), created by the teaching staff of the movement itself, brings in one of its lessons, called, "The mission of the monitor", the following assertion:

January 20th, the day of the monitor, the day of those who fight for a better tomorrow, and want to turn darkness into light, loneliness in friendship, and sadness into joy. The monitor is someone who will make the field a land of free men, because to be free we have to educate ourselves. [...] I, monitor, must be the light which will lighten the illiterate. I will be someone who works for a strong and true Christianity to come to the world. We must follow this motto: All for God and for our brothers (PEREIRA, 1964, p. 4.).

This lesson was written by a monitor of a small town. It shows the importance that the monitor was in the movement, as it is the one that "will make the field a land of free men" and is also "the light that will lighten the illiterate".

The movements of education and popular culture of the decades of 1950/1960, according to Germano (2004) present typical features of the political romanticism: "refusal of this social reality, sense of loss, nostalgia and search for what was lost". "Thus, the present would be denied, and the future would be object of interrogation, and, somehow, a reference to the past" (2004, p.5). All the text of the lesson in question is redolent of that romantic spirit, almost heroic.

The radio was the big star in the radio schools. It represented an extraordinary technological novelty for that needy and so devoid of everything place. We shall not forget that we are talking about the interior of the northeastern region, Brazil, in 1958, the beginning of this educational movement. A letter from a monitoring well exemplifies this dimension: "At my school what is grandest is the Radio. In the room where settles the class, it was reserved a place with all zeal and affection. This radio is music, teacher and church, teaching and instructing the people in our rural areas." (MORAIS, s/d. In: PAIVA, p. 55).

The radios, of the Phillips brand, came from Holland, donated by Catholic institutions. At the time Catholic institutions, such as the Adveniat, Misereor, among others, helped a lot the Catholic social works in the Northeast. The radios were equipped with a device that did tuned only the Issuer for Rural Education. Because of the lack of electricity in rural areas, the radios worked with electric battery. As a teaching-learning tool it was invaluable. The vehicle, itself, already pointed out, the speech of the monitor reflects the dimension of this importance. The isolation of the rural areas was broken. Without leaving their community, the workers and the rural communities could tune into the world.

Backed in this tripod, the didactic and pedagogical activities were being built. For the best achievement in the teaching-learning process, quite varied materials were employed, such as "cordel" literature, viola singings, folkloric events, plays, politicization books, newspapers, brochures and reading books.

The manifestations of the popular culture, such as viola singing, "cordel" verses, facilitated the transmission of content, as they talked about the day-to-day of the peasant population. The reading book, "Educate to Build" prepared by the core team of the MEB Natal itself, as already mentioned, had the collaboration of texts written by the monitors. The book approaches questions close to the interests of the workers, such as work, conscious vote, the importance of education and health, value of foods, cooperatives, culture, folklore, popular festivals, but also

Christian messages such as “God the creator of all things”, “love of neighbor”, “and the gospel as good news”. The texts in the book bring messages that seek to educate, and as was said at the time, aware. There is clear guidance so that workers know and seek for their rights, their freedom, and their importance as beings responsible for their story. In the text entitled “the value of the vote”, without authorship declaration, reads:

Brazil needs the conscious vote for each of us to develop it. The conscious man knows that his vote is a weapon. He knows that this weapon must be used for the behalf of the people. He knows that this weapon should be used to choose leaders for all the people. The true vote is conscious. The true vote is free. (VALOR..., 1964, p. 27).

There can also be observed the “romantic affinities of the popular education”, exposed by Germano (2004). But, despite this particular, this educational experiment was of great importance in the struggles of workers, in asserting their rights and also literacy them. Besides reading the book “Educating to Build” MEB used in the literacy primer “Effort” and arrived to prepare a book reading “To live is to fight”. The latter was seized by conservative forces of the Lacerda government, in Rio de Janeiro, and has almost not been used; the “Effort” textbook, widely used in the educational action of MEB, was the responsibility of the National Team. It was directed to the rural population and presented a critical content, transformative and, as said at the time, conscientizing, as in general the publications of the national MEB were presented. The Lesson 2, of the 2nd reading book, in verse form, says “In Brazil there is a lot of land waiting for planting, all land without use prejudice gives to the nation. If the land is undivided there is no solution. But the Land Statute can help the matter, because some of the people, who plant corn and beans, want a little land to plant with more passion.” (1965, p. 6).

For the ruling elites of the country, at the time, land and agrarian reform were true taboos, work on this theme on the literacy of peasants meant subversion of the established order, with serious consequences for their authors. This educational activity was severely repressed by the dominant forces of the country in the post- coup of 1964. It was one more experiment in popular education pruned by the blow. The MEB continued its activities, but quite mischaracterized of its initial proposal.

### **3. The campaign “standing on the ground also learns to read”**

Unlike the previous experiment, which was initiated by the Church, this educational experiment was born in the popular struggles for more education. The first elected mayor of Natal, in 1960, was Djalma Maranhão, elected by a coalition of opposition, mainly sustained by popular participation, incorporated of Popular Commands, consisting of politicians, intellectuals, trade unionists, students, leaders of neighborhoods. These commands prepared the campaign of the mayor and created other levels of organization, such as the Nationalist Camps, which served as guidance for voters and also to raise funds for the campaign. The most representative organizations were called Nationalists Committees, which rallied people through streets and neighborhoods, creating a capillary network that politically mobilized the entire city of Natal (GERMANO, 1982).

After the possession, the mayor fulfilling the commitments of the campaign and accepting popular demands, particularly of the nationalist 240 Nationalists Committees, elected education and culture as a priority for his government. The public education system was in clear decline. There was a lack of schools. The number of public schools had declined in the past years. However, due to the lack of resources, the mayor struggled to implement reforms and improve the education, for example, to build new schools without the resources.

In the beginning of the administration, the city, to start the Literacy Campaign, expanded the called small schools, literacy classes, in emergency system when all the rooms available, donated by the community, where could run a literacy class were used: unions, churches, clubs, private residences and even a cinema. The teaching materials and meals were donated to students by the public authorities, the teacher, who was trained in emergency courses, received a small pro-labor, but water and electricity were under the responsibility of the entities responsible for the assignment of the room. In two years, these small schools had reached the number of 271 classrooms; however, this number was not sufficient to meet the demand for literacy. That was when the discussions and debates in the Committee of the Nationalist of the Rocas neighborhood came up with the idea of building schools using coconut straws. Moacyr de Goés, then Secretary of Education of the city, in his book “Standing on the ground also



learns to read (1961-1964): a democratic school”, he reports this time of the birth of the Campaign: “The discussion was long. For over two hours we were around the same issues: it was necessary to eradicate the illiteracy - the people wanted, the mayor too. But, how to end the illiteracy without money to build schools? I do not know, really, from whom came the proposal at that meeting of 40-50 men and women: - Make a school of straw!” (1980, p. 35).

At the end of the meeting a proposal was submitted to the mayor who approved it. There initiated the educational movement that was named “Standing on the Ground Also Learns to Read”, name taken from a newspaper article written about the educational movement of the prefecture of Natal. The implementation of the measures necessary for its development was under the responsibility of the Secretary of Education, Culture and Health, of the Municipality, which, for this purpose, created the Working Group on Popular Education. The neighborhood of Rocas was then selected to be the experiment area and construction of the first school of straw. The Nationalist Committee of the neighborhood was one of the most important participants in the struggles and popular demands.

The first school built was named Camp School of Rocas and in the same year, 1961, the city built another School Camp in Carrasco. Soon, it was made the calls to the school for admission of students to begin classes. In 1962, seven more Camps were built in neighborhoods of Nordeste, Igapó, Aparecida, Quintas, Conceição, Granja and Nova Descoberta. It is important to highlight that they were all neighborhoods on the periphery of Natal. There were schools built for the poor people. The enrollment has evolved rapidly in 1960, the Little Schools catered to 2,974 students, in 1961, the total number of students served was 5,249. Regarding the registration of the Schools/Camps, according to Germano (1982), it is difficult to compute the lack of registration. Goés, states that in April of 1964, the overall enrollment exceeded 17,000 students. (1980, p. 79)

The camps had a different architecture from the traditional schools. They were composed of rectangular sheds, where the classrooms happened, with 30 X 8 meters, with thatched roof and floor of beaten clay, without sides; a circular shed, with the same features as the other, for the recreation of the students, parties and folkloric presentations and, also, for meetings of parents and teachers. Internally, the rectangular sheds were divided into four rooms, divided by thick and wide boards used as chalkboards and bulletin board and also as partitions between the rooms; they did not reach the ceiling, neither the floor, they did not have the goal of closing the classes because, as we said before, the sheds had no side walls. It was a literally open school closed in the ceiling by the coverage of straw. Masonry construction, there was only one room where the board functioned, secretary, warehouse, among others, and restrooms. (Goes, 1980).

All camps were equipped with the same infrastructure. The classes were held at regular times, in three shifts, similar to the education of the public school system form. At night worked as a school for adult education.

The teachers who participated in this experiment received varied training, comprised of volunteers, the community, and partly by city officials. Initially, the teachers were trained in emergency courses; until 1962, the city held two of such courses: the first, in 1961, 250 candidates participated in the campaign, who were admitted as lay teachers; in the second, as there was a large number of people, there was a previous selection, with the requirement of complete primary to the candidates; 300 people attended the course, which lasted two months, but only 250 were seized in the Campaign as monitors, or lay teachers. This course gave a greater emphasis on the first three grades of school, called primary course, larger field of action of the campaign.

With the expansion of student enrollment, arose the need for more teachers with better qualifications, it was, then, created the Center for Teacher Education (CFP) in 1962, an institution that became responsible for the teaching coordination of the campaign, or as Goés reports, the Center for Teacher Education has become the “brain of the campaign” (1980, p.72). It offered three modes of courses: a) Emergency Courses, for training of lay teachers, lasting for three or four months, to meet the interior municipalities that had agreement with the city of Natal; Normal gym, lasting four years, which served the Campaign teachers who had previously attended the courses Emergency; and Normal College, high school level, improving the training of the Campaign teachers and also open to other interested people. (CORTEZ, 2005)

The Training Centre gave a greater dynamism and organicism to the Campaign. In addition to the training courses for teachers, it was also responsible for supervising and for all technical and pedagogical orientation, which was held weekly through meetings and visits. It also had an Audio-Visual Resource Center, which prepared the didactic-pedagogic material, and a Demonstration School, which served as a laboratory for teachers and students of the CFP.

The teaching-learning materials used in the campaign, as in MEB, were quite diverse. At first, the process of teaching-learning was not different from the one that existed in the public school system, little by little, with the maturing of the Campaign; the teaching process was being renovated, modified. Widely used was the “Book Reading 'standing on the ground also Learns to Read”, an adaptation of the book “Reading for Adults of the Popular Culture Movement of Recife”, as written on the cover of the book, or how the Secretary of Education at the time, Moacyr of Goés, said on the presentation of the book: “This "Textbook for the reading of Adults of the Campaign Feet on the Ground Also Learns to Read" is not an original work; it is an adaptation to the local conditions of Rio G. do Norte of the "Textbook for Adults Movement of Popular Culture of Recife". If the "Textbook" of the MCP is valid, as we believe, then, it is certain that we seize this valuable experience and I apply it between us.” (1963)

There was a great integration between the educational movements of Natal and Recife. Miguel Arraes, governor of the state of Pernambuco and Djalma Maranhão, Mayor of Natal, were very close politically, communed the same struggles and ideals. This book, as the reading book of MEB, also brings a rather critical, conscientizing and also of appreciation of the popular culture in its many interpretations. Some of the lessons are quite enlightening on how these expressions were used, like: “It is necessary to be formed, in Brazil, a broad front, bringing together all those who work to eliminate the causes of the misery of the people. The suffering of our people is just a consequence. The causes that produce these sufferings are deeper. It can only be eliminated with planning and basic reform”. Or, “The folklore is all the traditions of a people. The most popular dances of the Northeast are: quadrilha, araruna, bambelô, chegança, bumba-meu-boi and pastoril.”

The use of the popular culture, in various expressions, was present at all the times. The shed of circular form, that every camp had, was the scene of varied artistic statements, including the folk performances of each district, which were fully explored: in the Rocas neighborhood, the "Araruna Society of Ancient Dances"; in the Conception neighborhood, the "Bambelô Asa Branca" ; in Carrasco neighborhood, the "Congos" and "Boi Calemba", among others .

As Germano says, “it is important to state, at the outset, that the Campaign meant, apart from small schools and School Camps, the creation of popular libraries, cultural squares, the Center for Teacher Education, the People's “Tetinho”, the Art Gallery; meant the formation of reading circles, the conducting of cultural encounters, the reactivation of groups of folk dances, the promoting of art exhibition, the presentation of plays, in other words, resulted in a cultural organization in the city, where people participated effectively and not just watched as a spectator” (1982, p.102,103).

The movement of the campaign Feet on the ground also Learns to Read represented a general change in the culture of the city. The campaign went beyond the traditional limits of action of our schools, mobilized the entire city, the popular culture received a great encouragement and appreciation, folk groups that were disappearing resurfaced and, especially the poorest strata of the population initiated a process of apprehension and worship of the cult knowledge, so distant until that. As the MEB, this was another experiment in popular education finished by the coup of 1964.

#### **4. Final considerations**

The two educational experiments studied represent popular social movements, with nationalist trend, with proposals for social reforms that, maybe if they had not been pruned, they could have gone further in their accomplishments. There were movements led by intellectuals of the middle classes, Catholics and non-Catholics, socialists and non-socialists. They present a romantic aspect, often assigning education a wrong paper of processing, remnants of the Enlightenment belief in the regenerative potential of education (Beisiegel, 2004), but also represented moments of liberation, of progressive quest for a more fair and humane society.

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