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Rural Education and competing projects for the countryside: political-pedagogical resistances and the capixaba scenario

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Abstract: This article analyzes the political and conceptual foundations of Rural Education in Brazil, emphasizing the contradictions between competing projects for the countryside and their impacts on the existence and permanence of schools in rural territories. The research adopts a qualitative approach, based on theoretical review and document analysis, articulating historical, political, and educational dimensions. Drawing from the case of Espírito Santo, it highlights how the expansion of agribusiness has led to the systematic closure of schools, weakened community ties, and deepened educational inequalities. Rural schools are defended as practices of resistance, oriented toward the appreciation of countryside cultures, territory-based education, and the affirmation of alternative educational rationalities. The article also discusses the strategic role of the school in strengthening rural territories and in the symbolic and material disputes that surround public education in the countryside. Based on official data from Espírito Santo, it denounces the advance of a technocratic and deterritorializing logic, which is countered by initiatives that reaffirm Rural Education as a horizon of social transformation and a means of constructing identity, belonging, and justice.

Keywords: context-based education; rural school; school closures; resistance; territorialization.

1 Introduction

Rural Education, conceived from the historical struggles of rural communities, stands in opposition to the traditional rural education model subordinated to the logic of agrarian capital. It affirms the countryside as a territory of life, cultures, labor, and knowledge, upholding a different conception of education and rural development. Faced with the dispute between antagonistic projects for the countryside, it presents itself as a response to the invisibility of peasants in public policies and as a means of strengthening their identities and territorialities.

The objective of this research is to discuss the political and conceptual foundations of Rural Education in Brazil, highlighting the contradictions between the competing projects — peasant and agribusiness — and analyzing the impacts of these tensions in the Capixaba scenario, especially regarding the closure of schools situated in rural territories. We are interested in understanding how the expansion of



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agribusiness, as a hegemonic project, influences political-educational decisions that compromise the permanence of rural schools and, in practice, also the right to quality public education with social relevance. Based on this, we propose the following question: to what extent has the advancement of agribusiness influenced political decisions that contribute to the closure of rural schools and the deterritorialization of peasant people?

We start from the hypothesis that the closure of schools in rural territories does not stem solely from technical or administrative decisions. It expresses a political project that ignores the specificities of the countryside and threatens the territorial and cultural ties of peasant communities. This text is derived from a chapter of the doctoral thesis “Juventudes rurais e territorialidades” (Jadejiski, 2024), revisited and expanded to deepen the analyses.

The investigation adopts a qualitative research approach (Lüdke; André, 1986), guided by a theoretical review and document analysis. The study draws upon academic productions, School Census data regarding school closures in rural territories (Espírito Santo, 2024), and educational regulations (Brasil, 2010; Espírito Santo, 2022), seeking to articulate historical, political, and educational dimensions in understanding the disputes surrounding Rural Education.

Furthermore, the investigation is grounded in our lived experiences within this field of practices and knowledge: the first author, holds a degree in Rural Education, with a teaching and pedagogical coordination background in rural basic education schools, in addition to research conducted during Master’s and Doctoral studies; and the second author, a professor and researcher at the Federal University of Espírito Santo (Ufes), with leadership in the *Escola da Terra Capixaba* Program, in the research group “Culturas, Parcerias e Educação do Campo,” and the “Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisa em Educação do Campo, da Cidade e Educação Social.” These distinct and complementary insertions underpin a careful reading of the processes of resistance and territorialization of Rural Education in the Capixaba scenario.

The text is organized into three parts: in the first, we discuss the political and conceptual foundations of Rural Education; in the second, we analyze the repercussions of these disputes in the Capixaba context, based on recent data and productions; in the third, we propose a reflection on the rural school as a space of

resistance and production of territorialities. We consider the period from 2010 to 2023, with an emphasis on School Census data regarding rural schools in Espírito Santo.

2 Political and conceptual foundations of Rural Education

Rural Education in schools and universities requires pedagogical work that starts from the concrete reality, aspirations, and formative needs of the peoples of the countryside. The contents historically produced and accumulated by society gain greater meaning and significance when they engage in dialogue with the knowledge, practices, experiences, and multiple territorialities produced in rural territories. By recognizing the reality of the peasants, Rural Education legitimizes its subjects (Jadejiski; Foerste, 2023).

According to Decree No. 7,352, of November 4, 2010, all individuals who produce their material conditions of existence through labor in rural areas are included among the rural populations (Brasil, 2010), that is, they are subjects who require an education appropriate to their realities. Although Rural Education involves a multiplicity of subjects, the peasant is assumed as the collective subject of this social practice, observes Caldart (2012).

Rural Education has its origins linked to the struggles of social movements for the construction of a public education policy aimed at the development of agrarian reform settlements, which spurred the creation of the Programa Nacional de Educação na Reforma Agrária (National Program for Education in Agrarian Reform - *Pronera*) (Fernandes, 2006). Rural Education was and continues to be built through struggles for a rural development model that prioritizes the peasantry. Thus, it emerged in opposition to traditional rural education.

Molina and Freitas (2011) revisit the process of peasant struggle that spurred the origin of Rural Education, reflecting that it is linked to the construction of a rural development model in which peasants are at the forefront. This perspective opposes the dominant development model, which has always favored large landowners in the country, and is part of a broader project of education for the working class in search of a new societal project, the researchers argue.

The Rural Education Movement has consolidated itself through nationally referenced discussions regarding the rights of the rural peoples, highlighting the protagonism of its subjects within the country's educational scene, as Molina and

Freitas (2011) emphasize. Therefore, the researchers link the concept of Rural Education to educational processes and rural conflicts that arise, mainly, from divergent economic and social interests in the dispute over the use of territory. This leads us to an important question: Rural Education is also a response to the specific tensions and challenges of the countryside.

According to Fernandes (2006), education holds opposing meanings between the peasantry and agribusiness. The researcher asserts that Rural Education stems from an educational policy that seeks to serve the diversity of the people of the countryside, viewing peasants as protagonists in proposing public policies and not merely as beneficiaries. Based on this perspective, the author points out some substantial differences between the constitution/construction of Rural Education and traditional rural education:

Rural Education is contained within the principles of the agrarian question paradigm, while traditional rural education is contained within the principles of the agrarian capitalism paradigm. Rural Education has been built by peasant movements based on the principle of the autonomy of material and immaterial territories. Traditional rural education has been built by different institutions based on the principles of the agrarian capitalism paradigm, in which peasants are not protagonists of the process, but subordinate to the interests of capital (Fernandes, 2006, p. 37).

It is a fact that Rural Education goes hand in hand with peasant agriculture, whereas traditional rural education is at the service of agribusiness. As Caldart (2020)¹ observes, agribusiness is not interested in schools in/of the countryside; on the contrary, what this productive logic requires in terms of instruction to train the workforce can be found in any school, since the knowledge needed to work with the modernization of agriculture is progressively distant from the agricultural labor of peasants with the land. The author warns that this ideology is increasingly present in public schools, fulfilling its role of distancing students from their territories of origin, making them vulnerable to buying into, or even incorporating, the idea that agribusiness is good.

Molina (2015) draws attention to the lack of clarity regarding the logics of agribusiness and peasant family farming that affects society. The author warns that

¹ Text by Roseli Saete Caldart titled "Função social das escolas do campo e desafios educacionais do nosso tempo" [The social function of rural schools and educational challenges of our time], prepared for the inaugural lecture of the semester of the Degree in Rural Education course at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Litoral Campus, held on March 9, 2020.

there is an ideological dispute between these two models of the countryside that surrounds both society as a whole and the rural settlements and schools, which are also influenced by narratives presenting agribusiness as the most viable path for rural development. Consequently, Rural Education takes on the challenge of defending the strengthening of peasant family farming, especially of an agroecological matrix, understood as a mode of production that articulates scientific and traditional knowledge, respects nature's cycles, and seeks the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of rural territories. From this perspective, agroecology stands as a vital alternative to the hegemonic model of agribusiness.

In Molina's words (2015, p. 382), "[...] without confronting agribusiness there can be no Rural Education: the victory of agribusiness is the defeat of Rural Education, and there is no possible coexistence." The author points out that this contradiction must be brought to light, as many attempt to disguise this conflict, arguing that these two models of the countryside can coexist and denying that the advancement of one implies the weakening of the other.

Molina (2015, p. 386) reinforces that agribusiness is not interested in Rural Education:

The agricultural model of agribusiness does not demand a significant increase in the schooling of the peasant people. The agricultural packages upon which it relies do not require, in the execution of productive processes in the countryside, extensive mediation of knowledge. Only a few processes demand a much more qualified workforce.

In this way, the logic of agribusiness increases technological dependence by not valuing a critical and emancipatory education for peasants. This scenario maintains the workforce in a vulnerable and easily exploitable position. Agribusiness expels peasants from their territories, expanding the demand for land destined for monoculture and the production of commodities, as Molina (2015) discusses. This rationality does not only affect the land: it also affects the symbolic bonds that sustain life in the countryside. As Haesbaert (2004) warns, deterritorialization occurs not only through physical displacement but also through the rupture of political and affective ties with lived spaces.

In this context, Molina (2015) argues that the agricultural model of agribusiness is based on the logic of capital accumulation and, consequently, on the expansion of monoculture areas destined for export, which intensifies the exploitation of peasants.

The author (2015, p. 388) further emphasizes that “[...] the closure of schools is part of the intense process of deterritorialization of peasants, accelerating the release of more land for the new logic of capital accumulation in the countryside, represented by agribusiness”.

In contrast, peasant agriculture sustains a different rationality. As Caldart (2020) highlights, this practice defends agroecology not only as a sustainable form of production but also as an educational principle that guides the way of living, working, and learning in the countryside. The author understands agroecology as a political-pedagogical foundation of Rural Education, as it establishes an ethical and solidarity-based relationship with the land and inspires school practices rooted in the territories.

From this perspective, the school of the countryside must engage with the living and real processes of agricultural labor, recognizing the centrality of nature, culture, and labor in human development. It involves understanding education as a social practice linked to the daily life of communities, where learning and producing go hand in hand. By incorporating the principles of agroecology, the school becomes a space for experimentation, research, and the collective construction of knowledge committed to the sustainability of life and social justice. For Caldart (2020), the peasantry does not reject modernization, but demands that it be carried out in harmony with the ecological, social, and cultural dimensions of life.

The territories of the peasantry, according to Fernandes (2006), are organized to produce the existence of the peoples of the countryside; therefore, they develop all territorial dimensions, being composed of heterogeneous landscapes where there is diversification in agricultural production, considering subsistence needs. In contrast, agribusiness’ territories are organized based on the economic dimension, meaning, they are at the service solely of the production of commodities and are composed of homogeneous landscapes where monoculture predominates.

This territorial differentiation has direct repercussions on conceptions of education, as Caldart (2009) points out when stating that Rural Education is configured as a phenomenon of the Brazilian reality. This theoretical demarcation that distinguishes it from traditional rural education is unique to our country. The author highlights that Rural Education strives to ensure that peasants, safeguarding all their diversity, have access to knowledge historically produced by society, but at the same

time criticizes the hierarchization of knowledge that disregards the peoples of the countryside as producers of knowledge.

This understanding directly relates to how pedagogical work is structured in schools in the countryside. In this sense, Molina and Sá (2012, p. 331) reflect:

Another central aspect to be transformed in the school of the countryside is the fact that its teaching and learning processes must not develop in isolation from the reality of its students. The main foundation of pedagogical work must be the materiality of the students' real life, from which opens up the possibility to re-signify scientific knowledge, which is already, in itself, the product of collective labor carried out by hundreds of men and women throughout the centuries.

Indeed, a contextualized education connected to reality is fundamental to combating inequalities. When the school ignores the particularities of the countryside, it reinforces historical mechanisms of silencing and making peasant subjects invisible. The recognition of the concrete conditions of life, labor, and production in these territories is, therefore, a condition for the school to fulfill a formative role coherent with the realities it intends to address.

The social and educational inequalities that affect the Brazilian countryside, as Molina (2015) analyzes, justify a specific education for the subjects of the countryside. For the author, Rural Education gains more strength when it articulates with the broader struggles of public education, since free, quality public schooling in Brazil faces a constant threat of privatization. In this context, she warns that this articulation goes against market logic, as it seeks to guarantee that education, as a universal right, does not become a commodity.

Molina (2015) problematizes that the idea of treating unequals equally results in the deepening of inequalities; therefore, this understanding has occupied a central place in debates regarding public policies for Rural Education. Molina (2015, p. 385) writes that the specificity of this struggle emerges from the “[...] historical social inequalities in peasants' access to rights, who, through their collective struggles, begin to demand from the State the execution of specific policies, aiming at the suppression of these historical inequalities.” It is recognized that overcoming these inequalities and consolidating a fair and inclusive education are only possible through specific public policies that consider the structural differences in society.

Caldart (2021, p. 355) states: “Rural Education is the name that, at present, identifies and brings together different struggles undertaken by the people who live and

work in the countryside to guarantee their access to public education.” The author problematizes that the historical denial of this right, or its precarious fulfillment, often combines with the denial of other human rights, increasing inequality and social exclusion, as well as the marginal treatment of rural communities. The institutionalization of Rural Education, from this perspective, represents an important step in the organization and articulation of these struggles.

An important outcome of this collaboration is the Fórum Nacional de Educação do Campo (National Forum for Rural Education - Fonec), institutionalized in August 2010 at the headquarters of the Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura (National Confederation of Agricultural Workers - Contag) in Brasília. Among the full members of the forum are public education institutions and social and union movements. Molina (2015) asserts that Fonec is an important space for articulation and mobilization, legitimizing itself as a guide for the struggles undertaken by the different collective subjects committed to maintaining and strengthening Rural Education.

In Caldart (2009, pp. 40-41), we find: “The protagonists of the process of creating Rural Education are the ‘peasant social movements in a state of struggle’, with emphasis on the social movements fighting for agrarian reform, and particularly the MST (Landless Workers’ Movement)”. The author also revisits the origins of Rural Education, stating that

the “of” in Education **of** the Countryside has to do with this protagonism: it is not “for” and not even “with”: it **belongs** to the workers, education **of** the countryside, **of** the peasants, pedagogy **of** the oppressed... An “of” that is not given, but which needs to be built through the process of formation of collective subjects, subjects who struggle to take part in the social dynamic, to constitute themselves as political subjects, capable of influencing the political agenda of society (Caldart, 2009, p. 41, author's emphasis).

The expression “of the countryside”, for Caldart (2009), relates to an education that is linked to “real life” and “concrete reality”. For the author, the school of the countryside requires a political-pedagogical project that reflects the diversity of concrete subjects that comprise the countryside. Furthermore, it needs to constitute itself as “[...] a school whose professionals are capable of coordinating the construction of a curriculum that contemplates different formative dimensions and that articulates pedagogical work in the dimension of knowledge with practices of labor, culture, and social struggle” (Caldart, 2009, p. 46). Understanding the political foundations of Rural

Education requires recognizing the practical implications of these conceptions in the field of educational public policies, as we will analyze below.

3 Rural Education and the struggle for public policies

The consolidation of Rural Education as a political agenda in Brazil is directly linked to the mobilization of social movements and the holding of formative and propositional events. The First National Conference for a Basic Education of the Countryside, held in July 1998 in Luziânia (GO), represented a milestone in this process. Caldart (2012) notes that, in the context of organizing this event, the expression Basic Rural Education was used, and that later, with the discussions of the National Seminar for a Rural Education, held at the University of Brasília (UnB) in November 2002, the nomenclature Rural Education came to be used, being consolidated at the Second National Conference that took place in 2004, which had as its motto “Rural Education: our right, the State's duty!”.

During the National Seminar at UnB, Caldart (2002) presented some features that outlined the identity of Rural Education under construction and that still remain on our radar, even after more than 20 years. In this event, the author emphasizes that we need to struggle for the right of all to education and that this fight must be waged in the field of public policies so that Rural Education is included in the general education debate. The researcher also reaffirms that education is a right, therefore, it cannot be viewed as a service, a commodity, or a compensatory policy.

Caldart (2002) highlights that Rural Education is identified by its subjects, that is, by the peasants who inhabit rural territories. It aims to educate them so that they become subjects of their own histories, for that reason, it is built with them. For the author, this is a proposal that asserts itself as a refusal of pedagogical “packages” and of attempts to transform peasants into instruments for implementing models that ignore or subjugate them. Furthermore, her analysis includes a critique of the conception of education focused exclusively on preparing the workforce to meet market demands.

Rural Education is linked to social struggles for the transformation of living conditions in the countryside, which involves agrarian reform, the valorization of labor, and the conquest of rights historically denied to peasant populations, as Caldart (2002) analyzes. The author argues that it is not possible to truly educate the people of the countryside without confronting the conditions that produce their dehumanization, and

that the very process of struggle for these transformations constitutes a path to humanization. Thus, education comes to assert itself as a political and emancipatory practice, committed to the construction of another way of life in the countryside.

Beyond what has been presented, Rural Education, according to Caldart (2002), is constituted in the dialogue amidst the diversity of its subjects — riverine communities, settlers, sharecroppers, and casual laborers, among others — who bear the common trait of being peasants with different ways of producing, living, experiencing reality, and struggling. Thus, for the author, this educational proposal presupposes humanization through an educational project that emerges from practices developed with its subjects, which requires recognizing that the countryside is a producer of pedagogies and knowledge and “[...] that there is no way to truly educate the subjects of the countryside without transforming the dehumanizing social circumstances, and without preparing them to be the subjects of these transformations” (Caldart, 2002, p. 22).

According to Caldart (2002), Rural Education constitutes itself as an intention to educate and re-educate the subjects of the countryside in the wisdom of recognizing themselves as “guardians of the land”, not solely as owners or workers, but as participants in a common good. The author argues that it is necessary to learn to care for the land and, from this care, to draw lessons on how to also care for human beings and their education.

Even though Rural Education transcends the dimensions of the school, the struggle for the construction, maintenance, and permanence of school institutions constitutes one of its main features, according to Caldart (2002). For the researcher, the school of the countryside must be a space where children and young people can feel proud of their origin and their way of life, aware of the existing challenges in the countryside and prepared to face them collectively. From this same perspective, Caldart (2002) highlights that educators play a fundamental role in this process and, therefore, need permanent policies for training and appreciation.

The struggle for public policies within the scope of Rural Education is inseparable from the historical mobilization of its subjects. Molina (2015) teaches us that Rural Education requires constant vigilance and the defense of rights historically won through hard struggles, as we cannot allow for setbacks. Furthermore, the author points out that we must also not lose sight of the three elements of the triad that allow

us to understand the phenomenon of Rural Education in the Brazilian reality: countryside, education, and public policy.

In this sense, Molina and Sá (2012, pp. 330-331) contribute to this debate:

For the school of the countryside to contribute to the strengthening of peasants' resistance struggles, it is indispensable to guarantee the political-pedagogical articulation between the school and the community through the democratization of access to scientific knowledge. Strategies appropriate for the cultivation of this participation must promote the construction of collective decision-making spaces regarding the work to be carried out and the priorities of the community to which the school may contribute.

In this way, the dialogue between scientific knowledge and the knowledge produced by peasants expresses an epistemological dispute that repositions the territory at the center of pedagogical work. This articulation demonstrates that the school of the countryside is a territory of collective meaning-making, in which experience, labor, and culture guide educational practices. It is precisely this perspective that allows for understanding the school of the countryside as an expression of broader struggles.

Rural Education, according to Caldart (2009), since its origins, has advocated for a school that is for everyone and is everywhere, and this includes the countryside, where peasants have access to schooling and to a politicized and contextualized education in their own territories. However, Caldart emphasizes that, although it was born from the struggle for public schools that offer quality education, and continues in this struggle, Rural Education is linked to diverse social struggles: “[...] struggle for land, for labor, for the de-alienation of labor, in favor of the democratization of access to culture and to its production, for political participation, for the defense of the environment” (Caldart, 2009, p. 43).

Caldart (2009) invites us to reflect that the struggle for Rural Education does not cease to be a defense of a unitary school, but warns against the risk of a false universalism that takes a particularity as if it were universal. The author highlights that the unitary character corresponds to the articulation of diversity and that the countryside, historically, has not been recognized in this plurality. She further explains that this educational proposal was not born with the intention of defending particularisms nor of reinforcing the dichotomy between countryside and city produced by capitalism. Finally, she emphasizes that overcoming this opposition requires the

recognition of the particularities of the productive and formative processes in the countryside and the historical understanding of this contradiction.

Following these reflections, Caldart (2021) broadens the understanding of Rural Education by shifting it away from a merely institutional reading, reinscribing it within the field of social contradictions that forge the relationships between capital, labor, and territory. In this movement, the author argues that Rural Education must be understood as a social practice, concept, and conception, as it emerges both from the historical struggles of peasant subjects and from the political disputes that affect the production of life in these territories.

Rural Education as a social practice, for Caldart (2021), originates from a concrete movement, historically situated and led by collective subjects who decided to articulate their struggles in a national mobilization. The author highlights that this political-educational 'baptism' marks the beginning of a process that seeks to build public policies aimed at the populations of the countryside, reaffirming the human right to access diverse forms of education and the social right to participate in conducting educational processes.

As a concept, Rural Education, according to Caldart (2021), is a collective and processual construction, linked to the trajectory of the very subjects who are its protagonists. For the author, it is a self-definition that emerges from the critical analysis of social contradictions experienced in and beyond the countryside, recognizing that the denial of the right to education is articulated with other forms of exclusion, such as access to land, labor, and culture. In this sense, the concept expresses the path of a movement that is not limited to the school, but that claims education as part of a broader project of a dignified life in the countryside.

Furthermore, according to Caldart (2021), as a conception, Rural Education is configured as a way of thinking, struggling, and doing education anchored in the reality of the workers of the countryside and in their experiences, cultures, and ways of producing life. It is not a pre-established formula, but rather a political construction, contested in the social relations in which it materializes. The author highlights that this conception is grounded in emancipatory goals and in a critical understanding of the social determinations that mark the lives of these individuals. This is a vision that broadens Rural Education beyond the local sphere, connecting it to the social struggles

that traverse the territories and to the educational practices that produce resistance in diverse contexts.

In an assessment of the political and formative construction of Rural Education, Caldart (2018) states that this modality is realized as a territory, but also in a territory, produced from social relations built by the plurality of subjects of the countryside. The author (2018, p. 125) explains: “We understand the countryside as territory, articulation between subjects, places, social relations, struggle, culture, labor; organization of social life in a specific place and historical time”.

Rural Education, asserts Caldart (2018, p. 125), has its identity based on the diversity of its subjects, who are “[...] diverse in origin, in labor ties, in culture, in gender, in ethnicity, race...”. The author calls upon us, as a movement, to build the school of the countryside by confronting capital and agribusiness, so that the countryside and its subjects may be recognized in their specificities. The researcher (2018, p. 127), just like us, dreams of a new time that Rural Education is helping to build: “But the time will come when saying agriculture will mean saying agroecology, agri-culture in interaction with nature, because capitalist industrial agriculture will no longer be understood by society as agriculture”.

Caldart (2018, pp. 128-129) also makes a call to the schools of the countryside:

The schools of the countryside are called upon to take part in the processes of territorialization of peasant agroecology, helping in the reunion of working families/communities (countryside and city) with agri-culture... This is magnificent! And it gives even more meaning to our struggles to have schools in the countryside.

Furthermore, Caldart (2018) endorses that Rural Education involves political stances regarding the dynamics that organize life in the countryside. Based on this analytical perspective, Caldart (2023) revisits the 25 years of the political and pedagogical legacy of Rural Education and points out that we still face challenges such as the closure of schools and the need for better working conditions in them. The author (2023, n.p.) asserts:

Our specific struggle continues: not one less public school and many more public schools in our peasant territories. It is always necessary to emphasize: in-person schools with real social relations, life pulsing from outside and from inside.

Struggle, indeed, is one of the words we hear and speak most often in the context of Rural Education, given that the school of the countryside struggles all the

time and at all times to exist. This permanence is not limited to the defense of its infrastructure, but involves confronting policies that relieve the State of its responsibilities and intensify processes of discontinuity of educational actions in the territory. It is about contesting societal projects that guide the meaning of the school and the place that peasant subjects occupy in political decisions.

Caldart (2023) highlights that the years of the Movement for a Rural Education have reaffirmed that a school of the countryside starts from the processes of the production of life, both through social labor and through its connections; therefore, it cannot remain detached from the contradictions present in the reality of the countryside. The social function of the school requires that it positions itself practically, but also politically, in the face of the different agricultural logics.

The legacy of Rural Education, according to Caldart (2023), invites us to think of a school that welcomes the human being in such a way that they feel authorized to speak their mind, to narrate their origin, and to be who they are, without shame, embarrassment, or guilt. The school, in the author's view, assumes the educational task of knowing the environment in which this individual lives and the relationships that constitute their way of being, using these experiences as a basis for planning and pedagogical action.

This discussion, however, gains even more concrete contours when we observe its materialization in different educational contexts. These conflicts, although situated at a national level, also take on particular outlines in the states. In the Capixaba scenario, Rural Education faces its own challenges, as we will discuss next.

4 Rural Education in Espírito Santo: school closures, resistance, and territories in dispute

In Espírito Santo, Rural Education is characterized by different forms of pedagogical, methodological, and management organization within the multiple formats and educational experiences that the state hosts. It is present in Basic Education in multigrade schools, family schools, community schools, in the Centros Estaduais Integrados de Educação Rural (Integrated State Centers for Rural Education - CEIERS), and in other experiences that take the reality of rural students as a starting point for pedagogical work (Foerste; Oliveira; Baldotto; Jadejiski, 2023). In Higher Education, we highlight its presence at Ufes in the undergraduate course in

Rural Education and in the professional development and specialization courses of the Programa Escola da Terra Capixaba (Capixaba School of the Earth Program).

Although the ways of practicing Rural Education differ in each training experience, some pedagogical mediations are common among them. The term “pedagogical mediation” was introduced by Jesus (2011) to replace the term “pedagogical instrument”. According to the author, the term instrument evokes the idea of a technicist education, whereas the term mediation proposes to break with this perspective. That said, we appropriate this term to refer to all the “pedagogical elements” that favor the mediation between concrete reality and school contents, namely: the reality notebook, study visits, lectures, practical activities and classes, among others.

The state of Espírito Santo is the birthplace of the Pedagogy of Alternating in Brazil, characterized by its pioneering role in Rural Education, as theorized by the studies of Nosella (2012). However, it was only recently that the Operational Guidelines for Rural Education of the State of Espírito Santo were approved, via Resolution No. 6,596 of the State Council of Education (Espírito Santo, 2022). The document determines that municipal and state governments must implement the guidelines within a period of up to five years; however, what is observed in the state is a true disregard for Rural Education on the part of public authorities, with countless schools being closed every year.

School Census data show that between the years 2010 and 2023, 552 schools located in rural territories were closed: 104 state schools and 446 municipal schools, as we can observe in Table 1.

Table 1 – Number of schools in Espírito Santo (2010-2023)

Year	Rural schools		Urban Schools		Total of schools	
	Quantity	Percentage	Quantity	Percentage		
2010	1,149	S - 183	41.21 %	2,067	58.79 %	3,516
		F - 3				
		M - 1,239				
		P - 24				
2011	1,366	S - 167	39.59 %	2,084	60.41 %	3,450
		F - 3				
		M - 1,173				
		P - 23				
2012	1,331	S - 161	38.80 %	2,099	61.20 %	3,430
		F - 3				
		M - 1,146				
		P - 21				

2013	1,285	S - 121	37.78 %	2,116	S - 381	62.22 %	3,401
		F - 3			F - 15		
		M - 1,140			M - 1,300		
		P - 21			P - 420		
2014	1,249	S - 113	36.93 %	2,133	S - 384	63.07 %	3,382
		F - 3			F - 16		
		M - 1,111			M - 1,310		
		P - 22			P - 423		
2015	1,207	S - 113	36.06 %	2,140	S - 385	63.94 %	3,347
		F - 5			F - 16		
		M - 1,067			M - 1,322		
		P - 22			P - 417		
2016	1,161	S - 106	35.13 %	2,144	S - 380	64.87 %	3,305
		F - 5			F - 17		
		M - 1,029			M - 1,337		
2017	1,111	S - 101	34.21 %	2,137	S - 377	65.79 %	3,248
		F - 5			F - 18		
		M - 984			M - 1,342		
		P - 21			P - 400		
2018	1,054	S - 94	33.05 %	2,135	S - 370	66.95 %	3,189
		F - 5			F - 17		
		M - 934			M - 1,347		
		P - 21			P - 401		
2019	1,024	S - 92	32.41 %	2,136	S - 365	67.59 %	3,160
		F - 5			F - 18		
		M - 906			M - 1,356		
		P - 21			P - 397		
2020	983	S - 92	31.47 %	2,141	S - 353	68.53 %	3,124
		F - 5			F - 18		
		M - 866			M - 1,375		
		P - 20			P - 395		
2021	949	S - 89	30.68 %	2,144	S - 346	69.32 %	3,093
		F - 5			F - 18		
		M - 836			M - 1,393		
		P - 19			P - 387		
2022	928	S - 80	29.91 %	2,175	S - 333	70.09 %	3,103
		F - 5			F - 18		
		M - 823			M - 1,435		
		P - 20			P - 389		
2023	897	S - 79	29.12 %	2,183	S - 329	70.88 %	3,080
		F - 5			F - 18		
		M - 793			M - 1,441		
		P - 20			P - 395		

Source: Espírito Santo (2024) - school census data (2010-2023). Organization: the authors.
Note: S = State, F = Federal, M = Municipal and P = Private

The census data evidence the reduction of schools and reveal the advance of a logic that denies the right to education in rural territories, which is increasingly embedded in the logic of the market in our state. Many rural schools were closed on the grounds that they served a reduced number of students, which would incur high costs. Equally present is the argument that education in the city has a higher quality,

since schools have more resources and teachers do not need to divide their time as in multigrade classes.

As Haesbaert (2004) warns, deterritorialization is not restricted to physical displacement, but also implies the rupture of symbolic, political, and affective bonds with lived spaces. The closure of schools, in this sense, operates as a device for territorial emptying and the decharacterization of peasant ways of life. The school, in this context, is mistakenly viewed only as the place where pedagogical work takes place. It is disregarded that it is also a reference for the community in which it is located. This process often comes disguised by a certain euphemism; it is said that schools have temporarily suspended their activities or that they have been nucleated. Nucleation, in truth, is a pompous term used to refer to the closing of schools.

The issue is that the closure of schools is accompanied by a series of problems and a perverse reality. Students often need to wake up before dawn to take school transport, traveling for long hours along unpaved secondary roads, frequently in poor conditions of maintenance. In several Capixaba municipalities, transportation is provided by buses or vans that travel up steep hills, sharp curves, and unpaved sections. During rainy periods, the roads become slippery or flooded, compromising safety and school attendance. In this dynamic, rural students end up at a disadvantage in their education, which widens educational inequalities.

Furthermore, the long journeys cause physical and emotional strain and reveal the structural precariousness that accompanies the process of nucleation of rural schools in Espírito Santo. Undoubtedly, in addition to suffering from physical exhaustion, their lives are put at risk. When they travel to urban schools, distant from their communities, they are also subjected to curricula detached from their realities, which, not infrequently, reinforce the image of the countryside as a place of backwardness, inferiorizing the peasants.

This reality leads us to reflect on the centrality of the school of the countryside as a link between public policy and the strengthening of rural territories. For Caldart (2018), the school of the countryside needs to take part in the struggles of its time, contributing to the processes of agroecological territorialization and to the formation of subjects capable of resisting the logic of capital and affirming other ways of life. Thus, the existence of the school is directly related to the struggle of communities in their territories.

In Espírito Santo, the Centro Estadual Integrado de Educação Rural (Integrated State Center for Rural Education - CEIER) of Águia Branca is one of many examples of a school of the countryside committed to the strengthening of territorial ties and the valorization of peasant cultures. As discussed in Jadejiski and Foerste (2023), the pedagogical work of this school is organized around the students' reality, promoting learning that engages with labor on the land, local identity, and traditional knowledges.

At the CEIER of Águia Branca, the curriculum is structured in an integrated way, articulating areas of knowledge with the dimensions of peasant life. Educational practices mobilize pedagogical mediations that guide the collective production of knowledge. This dynamic favors the contextualization of content and the valorization of local knowledges, bringing technical and human formation closer to the concrete experiences of the countryside. As evidenced in Jadejiski and Foerste (2023) and in Jadejiski (2024), this school challenges the deterritorializing logic of agribusiness and affirms the school as a space of resistance and a life project connected to the territory.

Rural Education, from this perspective, is always associated with the territory. Fernandes (2006) explains that the countryside can be thought of both as a territory and as a sector of the economy, but that the first possibility is broader, since it does not reduce it to a simple space where commodities are produced. For the author, it is important to think of it as a territory that gathers all dimensions of human existence, as the economy is merely one of the multiple dimensions of the territory, and it is not possible to explain it solely from this perspective.

Fernandes (2006) argues that education, culture, production, labor, infrastructure, political organization, market, etc., are dimensions that interact and complement each other, coexisting within the territory; therefore, they cannot be analyzed separately, since relationships are built in the territories to transform them. He endorses that the countryside harbors distinct territories and different subjects who organize themselves to carry out life projects and develop the territory.

According to Molina and Sá (2012), Rural Education, in the context of school educational processes, seeks to cultivate principles that guide pedagogical practices committed to the formation of individuals for life in community. For the authors, it is about articulating school education with an active stance in social life, in order to

contribute to the development of the rural territory, understood as a space of existence for peasant subjects.

Rural Education, analyzed from the authors' perspective, seeks an academic/school formation aligned with the preparation for life, for the world of work, and not for the labor market. When educational practices strengthen the identity of peasants — specifically of the youth, as they are part of our scope of study — they contribute to the development of rural territories, where territorialities are produced. Given this scenario, it becomes urgent to reaffirm the centrality of Rural Education as a strategy of resistance and production of territorialities.

5 Final Considerations

Rural Education asserts itself as an expression of a political-pedagogical project in permanent dispute, and as a social practice linked to historical struggles for social justice, to the affirmation of the subjects of the countryside, and to the construction of alternative societal projects. Its emergence occurs as a counterpoint to the historical denial of rights to rural populations, especially regarding access to quality public education in its multiple dimensions. What is at stake is not only the content taught, but the place the school occupies in the production of meanings, belonging, and resistance in the territories of the countryside.

Throughout the text, we have evidenced that Rural Education is constituted in tension with the agribusiness project, which prioritizes productivity, land concentration, and the commodification of land. In this context, the school is a strategic space of dispute: it can be an instrument of adaptation to the logic of capital or a space for strengthening community bonds, agroecology, cultural plurality, and critical thinking. Rural Education, as affirmed in the political and pedagogical frameworks built by social movements and committed researchers, connects curriculum, territory, and emancipation.

In the Capixaba scenario, we observe that educational policy has oscillated between institutional advances and actions that deny the right to education in the countryside. Between the years 2010 and 2023, the closure of hundreds of schools considered rural reveals a technocratic and deterritorializing conception, which disregards the subjects of the countryside and their ways of life. This reality reinforces inequalities and compromises the development of rural territories, imposing challenges

to the permanence of families in the countryside, accessing education, and creating a sense of belonging.

Despite this, some experiences point to paths of resistance. The action of educators, students, communities, universities, and social movements has ensured the continuity of educational practices committed to the rural reality and to the formation of historical subjects. Rural Education, in this sense, continues to be constructed and contested in concrete social relations, in the territories, and in schools that refuse to reproduce exclusionary logics.

The defense of Rural Education therefore requires the strengthening of specific public policies, the recognition of the diversity of rural territories, and the valorization of school practices rooted in the lives of the peoples of the countryside. More than a compensatory policy, it is affirmed as a right and as a horizon of social transformation. To keep this proposal alive is to keep alive a project for the countryside that stands in opposition to homogenization and affirms the dignity, culture, and future of the subjects who inhabit and build the Brazilian countryside.

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