

*Dialogue, Problematization, Political Commitment and Community
Participation as the Main Elements of Integrated Pedagogical Actions of
Rural Family Houses*

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Abstract

This paper approaches an experience of integrated teaching in the Gurupá Family House, a technical school, integrated to the high school level of education, sponsored by an organization of rural workers in the hinterland of the Brazilian Amazon. Inspired by studies grounded on Gramscian's concept of Unitary School as a reference, we sought to identify the strategies of knowledge integration adopted at the focused school, which led it into a status of prominence, regarded as a positive educational experience, despite the poor infrastructure available. A case study yielded us to identify that the teaching strategies based on dialogue, critical reasoning of knowledge and work situations, teachers' and students' political commitment to the school's pedagogical project and the community's effective daily participation in the school life constitute the main elements of the integrated pedagogical action of the studied school unit.

Keywords: High school, Rural Family House of Gurupá, Amazon, Integrated teaching

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Introduction

Integrated teaching should be perceived as an ethical and political project of broad range for human development, which also involves coping with the poor quality of the teaching offered by the majority of Brazilian public schools. It is a project committed to social transformations, considering the fragmentation of knowledge as one of the main features underlying this poor-quality education, as well as to the challenge of facing it.

This article proposes the re-articulation of the relations involving theory and practice, expertise and performance, scientific and local knowledge, education and professional development, thus fostering a wider and more rigorous perception of reality and its natural and social phenomena. With that intent, it presents a curriculum structured around science, work and culture.

This proposal, inspired on Gramscian's idea of Unitary School (without intermingling), represents the search for "the most thorough education possible" for young workers, regarding the current conditions of a dependent capitalist country. Praxis-oriented, the integrated teaching presupposes a transformational, thus non-conformist attitude towards reality¹.

Proposed by a group of Brazilian intellectuals, among which we pose special emphasis on Gaudêncio Frigotto, Maria Ciavatta Franco and Marise Ramos, who launched the book "Ensino Médio Integrado (Frigotto, Ciavatta and Ramos, 2005), the integrated teaching was intended to reorganize the secondary education. The Ministry of Education, through its Coordination of Secondary Education, considered the integrated teaching as an official reference (Brasil, 2006, 2007a and 2007b), however, not all the members of the Ministry shared the compromise in equal terms of commitment. On account of that fact, integrated teaching was either 'more' or 'less' regarded throughout Lula's and Dilma's governments (from 2003 to 2014).

Meanwhile, integrated teaching has constituted itself a flag used to convince many professionals of the education field who sought an alternative for the lack of projects aimed at defying the poor quality of the Brazilian education. Some state public systems considered the integrated teaching as a key idea for their professional development units and /or for their regular secondary level during some governmental administration periods. Among these systems we refer to the Secretariat of Education of Pará, Mato Grosso, Espírito Santo and Paraná. Likewise, other rural and city schools of secondary level and technical education have also supported the idea, facing the challenge of promoting the "integrated teaching".

In a research developed in the state of Pará (Araujo, 2012) several schools were identified as having adopted the integrated teaching as their formal project, however, the majority did not effectively promote the intended meaningful changes either in the school organization or in the pedagogical practices. Nonetheless, some positive experiences have been registered in regards to the integrated secondary education – associated or not to the professional development.

This article will focus exclusively on the experience developed by the Rural Family House of Gurupá (RFH), located in the city of Gurupá, region of Marajó, in the state

¹ Refer to Araújo, Rodrigues and Silva (2014).

of Pará, 485 km away from the capital, Belém². The RFH of Gurupá is a secondary school operating under the principles of the Pedagogy of Alternance and whose students are young people coming from distinct rural communities of the nearby areas, mainly riverside, *quilombola*, and settled families. The RFH of Gurupá offers primary and secondary education classes, including technical secondary programs under the integrated system, our main focal point. We have interviewed students and “collaborators” who share teaching, secretary and other administrative tasks at the school.

Another aspect underlying this study is the fact that it analyzes a school, conceived and maintained, by a labor organization, clearly embracing a counter hegemonic stance.

The Rural Family House of Gurupá

During the visit to the school, diverse sorts of shortages and needs were revealed, namely teachers, administrative staff and regular electricity service (the school’s power generator operates in reduced hours due to the financial cuts on resources done by the municipal administration). In terms of infrastructure, the school lacked laboratories, including computer lab with access to the World Wide Web and varied didactic resources. Despite the difficulties, aspects such as teamwork spirit, political commitment to the school qualification and to the improvement of the community quality of life were clearly attested.

The purpose of the RFH of Gurupá (not named *school*), according to different interviewed subjects, consists in the “development of the community”. The general purpose, on that account, is not pedagogic. “Teaching is not what matters most” explains a monitor, “the most important point is the development of the rural workers’ well being: *quilombolas*, settled families and riverside people”. The school is definitely destined to that intent.

In a chat with the school educators, termed monitors (including the graduated professors) it was clear the school had been created and operationalized to fulfill the demands and educational needs of the local population. It is the community itself to determine the focal themes that will aggregate related contents and developmental activities, always converging to the central purpose – development of the local communities.

During conversations, the school youngsters revealed political maturity and the great majority revealed argumentation and exposition skills. It was also clear that just a few of them make frequent use of the Internet and although part of their time is dedicated to the productive tasks in the school and within the family properties, they did not differ in general preferences and tastes from any other youngster: music, soccer, dance and fun.

² Among the visited schools, *Escola Crescendo na Prática*, from the Settlement of Palmares II stood out, associated to LRWM – Landless Rural Workers’ Movement (in Brazil, largely identified by the acronym MST). We emphasize, however, two remarkable features which tend to limit its performance: a) strong institutionalization, and as a consequence, b) potential loss of radicalness of its original proposal.

The educational proposed program of the Rural Family House of Gurupá

The conception of the Rural Family House of Gurupá, in line with so many other existing RFHs in Brazil and in the world, arises from the need to qualify the young people from the rural areas so that they remain in rural areas and, by mastering skills and knowledge, become capable to contribute economically to improve the life of their community³ (GIMONET, 2007).

The Pedagogy of Alternance is regarded as a pedagogical reference of this institution⁴. Listed below, are the characteristics identified by Nosella (2007) as those expressing the specificities of this curricular arrangement:

- a) Alternance
- b) Internship
- c) School's articulation with the social reality of the context where it is inserted
- d) Didactic organization accomplished by a Study Plan that represents its "methodological specificity".

The articulation involving the axes 'knowledge', 'doing' and 'thinking' should allow students greater control of both theoretical and practical contents fostering enhanced possibilities to build and autonomously produce new knowledge.

The political content of the "pedagogical project" of the RFH of Gurupá is the main distinguishing feature of this school. It takes the pedagogical practice as a tool to promote human critical thinking over trivial matters and the development of concrete solution means for their specific problems.

Students recognize **human development** as the great goal of that school. For students, the emergence of new technical and political leaderships for the community is the school's main objective, which means the school is expected to provide the demanded experts, develop collaborative skills and assure the religious education of the students. Although technical, political and spiritual developments are distinct aspects of the educational program proposed at the RFH of Gurupá, they are carried out in an integrated manner.

³ The RFHs in Brazil, when created, sustained in their purposes, a strong social function instead of a merely educational one. They aimed at defying the lack of alternative techniques for the environment preservation, the rampant deforestation process, the inappropriate use of fire, the inadequate preparation of the soil, the intensive use of agro-chemicals, the poor conservation practices in cultivated areas, the monoculture, the rural exodus, the evasion of rural schools and the lack of elementary schools in the rural areas. (GIMONET, 2007, p.31).

⁴ According to Nosella (2007), the Pedagogy of Alternance is characterized as vocational and not professionalizing, at the service of the teenagers of the rural environment, guided by the fundamental purpose of social changes, making use of a Study Plan within an educational environment with small groups, ensuring the participation of their farmer parents.

Making this clearer, **monitors** (teachers) of the RFH reaffirm the School's commitment to the articulated goals involving **work, religion, and well being of families** and to the improvement and **overcoming of precarious conditions of family life in the community**. They also take the responsibility to broaden the horizons of the youth population, having the rural reality as reference.

A monitor explains the objectives of the RFH:

The difference between the public school and the Rural Family House, the issue of valuing the rural areas and not studying math because it is necessary for us to, but because it is a need that will be felt by the peasant while administrating, so it is about acquiring new knowledge. (Interviewed 1).

The worries towards the promotion of progress and well being among the country families is stressed, thus going beyond the essentially educational purposes which seem to characterize the other schools.

It is possible to infer from the students' discourses that **good quality education is that which values the local culture, family property, community and family**, enabling them to enjoy a dignified country life.

Under the influence of *Pastoral da Juventude*⁵ the school works towards the tripod – action, education and spirituality – believed to be the credentials for “students’ humanity”⁶.

Pedagogy pursuing integration

From the pedagogical standpoint, “integration” between theory and practice is pursued, having **the country and riverside lives as elements of integration and the participation of the families and community in the school dynamics** as a guarantee of the school's articulation with the realities of the youth and the community. This is its fundamental pedagogic specificity.

Family participation, therefore, is not merely a management strategy, but also a pedagogic one, as stated by a monitor:

The matter of the monitor's interaction with the family also makes the difference, the matter of following up the young people, the family knows that the kid is here and when he leaves he takes the notebook of Alternance telling how his week was, this makes a great difference, the matter of human development, for the families that participate directly, that have kids studying here, people who are members, this will end up making a difference between the RFH and the others (Interviewed Monitor 1).

The families are also encouraged to take part in classroom activities. From the **Planning stage**, the action is shared and built upon lively participation of the community. The Rural Family House of Gurupá plans its actions collaboratively, in that parents, students, monitors, coordinators and smallholder farmers of the region determine, during reunions and general sessions, which contents are more relevant to be included within the core thematic axes, in an integrated way, during the periods of alternance.

⁵ *Pastoral da Juventude*: Youth Ministry

⁶ The influence of the Church by means of BCCs – Basic Christian Communities – in that the region is analyzed by LOPES (2013).

Among the teaching procedures used by the monitors, in the search for integration of knowledge, we have identified a very wide range of strategies. They include lectures, seminars, study plans, personalized tutoring service, the reality notebook, the didactic notebook, field visits and study tours, external overtime-interpositions, return-to-school support activities, experiences, follow-up visits to families and communities, supervised professional practice, professional aspiration project, alternance monitoring notebook, debates and visits to small farms of the Marajó river communities.

Although several teaching procedures are employed, especially seminars and research activities, **collaborative work, problem posing and dialogue seem to constitute the basis of the different formative strategies** observed. While collaborative actions are encouraged, youngsters are demanded to prove responsibility and commitment to the school, to their own formative process and, mainly, to the community.

The work of the monitors in the classroom is guided by the idea of questioning the bases of knowledge and experiences. Even in practical classes held during the visits to the associated families' properties and supervised by the monitors, their interventions are minimal and, when they actually occur, the aim is to problematize. The rural producers committed to the school program and who take over the practical lessons on *techniques* and *knowledge learned throughout life*, are also oriented " not to provide the students with prompt responses ", but to stimulate the their reasoning skills.

For the monitors, **problem posing** and **research** are basic teaching and learning strategies grounded on the proposal of situations that start up reflection and dialogue, as explained by a monitor:

In the lectured classes, we use videos, seminars, the reading of notes, so it is quite dynamic, the interesting thing about the Rural Family House it does that a lot, allowing the students to speak a lot and search for knowledge, always when we take our courses, our meetings to socialize, we use the old tactic of the student who makes a direct question, expecting to get a straight answer, we always explain and explain not to offer direct questions, guide the student to seek the answer to the question he asked. He tries, he learns to seek knowledge, that is what we understand to be the most important, the most important knowledge that I can offer to my students and make him learn to develop his knowledge he already has and go search, so that's what we try, it is not easy, it is not simple, we often need the monitors, we need more theoretical basis to complement our practice and it is right there that your participation is welcome (interviewed Monitor 5).

This is how a monitor explains about the interdisciplinary action, which shall allow communication among monitors and the subject matters:

I'm a monitor, I and another colleague, even though I have specific degree in Education and the other monitor in Portuguese, or be an Agronomist, we believe the development is all this at the same time in a very practical and concrete way, when you are debating a topic

like *açaí*, of course you are looking for all the knowledge you have of the various subjects that you study separately, so the Portuguese language is involved, Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Arts, Culture when you explain about the production of a *paneiro*, all this is coming at the same time without saying: now it's Arts, now it's Portuguese language, now it's Mathematics, because we resist to this, a lot, because we understand that education is like that (Interviewed Monitor 5) .

When specific themes need to be more deeply explored and understood, this is done during nighttime in the overtime-organized sessions.

Assessment at the RFH is a continuous process and includes the different formative dimensions: content apprehension, working practices and the youth's social life at school and within the community, analyzed from the individual and collective perspectives. Instruments of assessment, including self-assessment include the reality notebook, the alternance notebook and the pedagogic file. Assessment is also accomplished in the rural properties where monitors register the demands and the families *evaluate if the student is learning, if he is putting into action what he does here* (Interviewed Student 1).

A student explains the assessment process as follows:

They assess us twenty four hours a day, for the entire structure of the House, we get Excellent, Good and Regular, then along the week the monitor controls all the activities developed in the House, then in the coming week the average is exhibited in the bulletin board. (Interviewed student 1).

Content organization is oriented in accordance to each of the three mentioned axis and then, developed into study plans that are expected to fulfill the community demands and be "translated" into the school planning, as explained by a monitor:

An interesting thing I told you, they interview students in the community, then when they get to the houses of the families, associated families that have a student here, there is joint effort in the community, there is a communal celebration, they question, the monitor is introduced as a representative of the Rural Family House who is doing a research, they end up... also some people who are not militants, as has been the case, start to take the cause, and ask about politics, economy, social problems, finally, there with the families, everything is questioned, so the teacher must be adapting to this. (Interviewed Monitor 4).

The follow up of the evolvement of the study plans is the school's and the family's responsibility, as explained by a student:

The dynamics of their class, he will use mathematics relating to the subject in which we are, but he uses all the rules of mathematics, the same thing is the Portuguese, he teaches Portuguese, but we're studying on a topic, for example, we work with texts a lot, reports, then the Portuguese it is already involving (interviewed student 5).

The knowledge brought by the students into the RFH, resulting from their direct social interaction in the community and from their relationship with the productive work, is highly appreciated.

The establishment of some internal RFH norms takes place during meetings and general sessions. They include: the constant monitoring of students throughout the internship period, their domestic responsibilities in terms of cleaning rooms, engagement in management activities, planting in and out the properties of the RFH, definition of relationship patterns among monitors / students, students / students. This internship period, according to the views of coordinators and monitors, should be understood as a part of a thorough formative and individual growth process shared by all and built upon daily constructed interrelations.

A student in the following narrative explains the organization of the school time and the community time

During these fifteen days we spend at home we do not just sit and rest, we do a survey with the families in our property, our community, we do this research and socialize the results together with the monitor when we get back here, so we put our knowledge, the knowledge of our family, of our community, the student socializes, the monitor does the same too, so there are conflicts of ideas, knowledge, I agree with that, but my classmate does not agree, then he disagrees with me, then we start to debate, so it's a very cool thing, as she says, you can not tell who is a monitor and who is a student (student interviewed 2) .

The **monitors** (teachers) hired by the local government of Gurupá and assigned to the RFH are required to meet the basic prerequisites – acknowledgment and conformity to the school's pedagogic project. These monitors have proved effectively engaged to the RFH project, whose main broad objective is to promote **human development**. The pedagogical practices at the RFH seek ways to overcome the separation of the intellectual and manual competencies of the laborer and also to find a clear strategy of integration by means of dialogue and problem posing.

An attempt to synthetize the pedagogical experience at the RFH of Gurupá

In this text, we approach the integrated teaching conceived as an ethical-political project of reality awareness in its thorough dimension, putting actions forward and on behalf of social transformation.

We start from the premise that the didactic solutions are not enough for the effectiveness of the integrated teaching, be they founded on the Pedagogy of Alternance, Pedagogy of Projects, Problem Posing or other strategies which try to articulate theory and practice.

The work developed at the RFH of Gurupá is an experience that is worth recognition for its uniqueness, in the state of Pará, one that offers secondary and technical levels of education in the rural area and has been undertaken by a labor organization with a clear counter hegemonic perspective. Another remarkable fact is that it is one of the sole educational experiences in Pará, which intentionally accomplishes the integration

between local and universal knowledge moving from the common school curriculum and the specific technical training⁷.

Managers, educators and students have had difficulties both in sustaining regular secondary education offers and in keeping attending the classes. The situation was aggravated with the election of the current state government staff (2011-2014), which cancelled a crucial agreement grating the transference of financial resources and available personnel.

This research allowed us to identify three specificities of the pedagogical practices underway in the focused school and which might be its differential aspects:

1. Political project and democracy as its target;
2. dialogue and problem posing as pedagogical strategies; and;
3. participation of the community as an assurance of quality.

The emancipatory political project advocated by the RFH of Gurupá is revealed by the way pedagogy is subordinated to politics, priority is given to social interests, commitment to the families' well-being is embraced, more importance is given to collective interests in detriment of individual interests and the way workers' knowledge and culture are highly regarded.

Elements such as: families, community, culture, politics, economy, knowledge and professionalization are inseparable in the studied educational unit. These multiple aspects should be considered in the elaboration of the study plans and in the definition of the teaching strategies.

The proposal of an integrated secondary education at this RFH has the primary intent of emancipating the rural worker in terms of his political and social position and the condition imposed to him by the capitalist society, in whose context the country life and knowledge are undervalued.

Dialogue and problem posing strategies emerge as signs of the pedagogical practices proposed by the RFH. They are visible in the dialogues with the community, in the school interactions and in the teaching and learning strategies. Students, coordinators and associated workers are agents with different roles, but with a symmetrical relationship. Problem posing is revealed in the different teaching strategies, in the dialogues between monitors and students and also in the emphasis given to research, faced as a pedagogical principle.

Community participation in the school life is also another characteristic of this experience. It is understood as a guarantee that the school will keep on putting forward its social mission of promoting the community well being.

The study carried out to this point has shown positive and also problematic issues that need to be understood in depth. The idea of fostering conditions for the rural people to remain in the country areas is still solid in the narratives collected from different interviewed subjects. The declarations, which expose their low expectation towards college education, treatment given to scientific data and the use of community time

⁷ Some photos taken during the visit to the RFH of Gurupá may be seen at:
<http://emdialogoamazonia.blogspot.com.br/2012/08/o-que-e-ser-jovem-em-gurupa-pa.html#more>.

need to be better understood, taking into account that counter hegemonic teaching projects should be built as “empowering time”⁸, just as labeled by Nosella (2007).

The idea of integrated education, here perceived as a possible and necessary project, despite of some relatively successful experiences such as this of the RFH of Gurupá, is still a pedagogical and political challenge. It presupposes the mobilization of educators committed to the articulation of their educational actions with an equalitarian society.

The effective integration of educational practices in Brazilian schools is still in the first steps of a long road, but the progress already achieved is undeniable. The fact that this project was brought into discussion and was undertaken by agents originated from different teaching units is a clear example. For that reason, it is extremely positive to attest that many schools and some public teaching systems have fully embraced the integrated teaching political and pedagogical project.

Other positive examples are the experiences and attempts of integration made in some schools and educational systems. These experiences must be analyzed, their progress and difficulties systematized so that they might subsidize actions to face the problem of knowledge fragmentation. None should be perceived as completely “right” or “wrong”, otherwise our possibilities of learning more about the process of building integration would be hindered. More appropriate pedagogically (and dialectically) is to try to recognize what such experiences mean, try to realize that many professionals under different teaching situations have tried to materialize the idea of integrated teaching and that these practices are the most relevant sources of pedagogical knowledge available to guide effective strategies of integration.

⁸ Translator’s solution for the original “tempo de libertação” in Nosella (2007)

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