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Movimento de Educação de Base (MEB): educational memories of resistance and citizenship (1961-1964)

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Abstract: This article seeks to analyze the educational practices of resistance and citizenship from Movimento de Educação de Base (MEB), given its historical educational relevance as a program of literacy and social awareness for young and adults, in the early 1960s, with the purpose of constructing another narrative about the Program, reviving forgotten facts, and deconstructing rigid memories. The MEB guided the education of workers for civic and critical training, using teaching materials such as the primer *Viver é Lutar* (MEB, 1963) and the radio as a transmitter of classes. Thus, it sought to answer the following question: how did educational practices from *MEB* configure a form of resistance and citizenship? To this end, it used bibliographical research and documentary analysis of written materials about the movement, using memory as a theory to strengthen the analysis. As a result, it highlights the MEB's legacy for human formation, as well as its contributions to thinking about the past and understanding the present, making it possible to hope and build the future.

Keywords: Movimento de Educação de Base; history of education; educational practices; primer *Viver é Lutar*.

1 Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the educational practices of resistance and citizenship within the Movimento de Educação de Base (MEB), given its historical significance in education as a literacy and social awareness program for youth and adults in the early 1960s, with the goal of constructing an alternative narrative about the Program, reviving forgotten facts, and deconstructing rigid memories. The Movement contributed directly to strengthening citizenship and resistance in the face of social injustices, in support of human dignity and the struggle to transform an oppressive reality. Consequently, the importance of bringing it to light today is evident.



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In this regard, we start from the understanding that “[...] there is no subject without context” (Carvalho, 2023), making it necessary to clarify that the transformations that took place in the country at the beginning of the latter half of the 20th century were characterized by economic and cultural advances stemming from fundamental reforms and the expansion of various public and private sectors. Thus, the context was marked by economic progress and, at the same time, by widening regional inequalities, as northeastern Brazil experienced high levels of extreme poverty, hunger, social injustices, and illiteracy.

This prospect of the denial of rights spurred the Northeast region to become a stage for innovative and emancipatory initiatives aimed at reversing this troubling situation and transforming it, or, at the very least, mitigating it. Thus, driven by the concerns of intellectuals, students (high school and college), professionals, self-employed individuals, politicians, artists, laypeople, and Catholics – followers of Liberation Theology – the early 1960s saw the emergence of mass politics and popular education movements, in particular, the MEB, established in 1961 by the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB) through Decree No. 50,370 of March 21, 1961 (Brazil, 1961), as a Basic Education Program, which would operate in underserved areas of the North, Northeast, and Central-West regions of Brazil.

For these reasons, this study is framed as historiographical research, drawing on theoretical knowledge from the fields of the History of Education and Memory, and engaging with authors such as Le Goff (1990), Burke (1992), Bittar (2019), and Costa, Rodrigues, and Nascimento (2020). It is worth noting that our methodology involved bibliographic research and documentary analysis of written materials that guided the Program or were used by MEB, such as the General Instructions document (MEB, 1961), the primer *Viver é Lutar* (MEB, 1963), and two letters from monitors addressed to the Movement’s team of supervisors. These documents were consulted remotely in the collection of the Virtual Exhibition of the “Prof. Casemiro dos Reis Filho” Center for Scientific Documentation and Information (CEDIC) at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC/SP). The process of document search and analysis was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of Bacellar (2008, p. 63), based on the premise that “[...] no document is neutral, as it always carries with it the opinion of the person and/or the body that produced it.” In this regard, we acknowledge that the preliminary selection

carried out by third parties determined which documents related to the MEB would be available to the public. Thus, to construct the corpus, we established the following selection criteria: the physical integrity of the materials, the state of preservation of the originals, and the legibility of the content. Furthermore, we adopted a critical approach to the sources, taking into account both the explicit elements and the silences and omissions present in the records. This methodological perspective allowed us to understand the documents not merely as repositories of information but as discursive constructions that reveal intentions, political-ideological disputes, and worldviews. Thus, the documentary analysis was conceived as an interpretive exercise that links the materiality of the records to the historical and social conditions of their production and preservation.

According to Le Goff (1990, p. 477), historical knowledge and memory are essential for social transformation, insofar as “[...] collective memory serves the liberation and not the enslavement of humankind.” Inspired by this perspective, the analysis of the MEB’s documentary sources allows us to identify educational practices linked to emancipatory and resistance-based concepts. By revisiting these records, we contribute to strengthening collective memory and to valuing the history of popular education, whose lessons remain relevant to the construction of citizenship and the pursuit of a more just and compassionate future.

According to Bittar (2019), the historian interprets the past from the present, seeking to understand the human condition and the events experienced in other times. From this perspective, the current need to recall facts and events highlights both the effort to frame memory and the recurrence of forgetting. Because, “[r]ecollection also means paying close attention to the present, [...], since it is not merely a matter of not forgetting the past, but also of acting upon the present” (Gagnebin, 2009, p. 55).

In seeking to historicize and analyze the MEB’s educational practices, we inevitably draw closer to the educational conception of politicization and resistance disseminated by Paulo Freire (1921–1997) in his educational project, within the context of the 1960s. We emphasize that the early 1960s were marked by popular education movements, guided by or grounded in the ideas of Paulo Freire, aimed at awakening a critical consciousness to liberate people from the situation of oppression in which they lived. According to Streck, Redin, and Zitkoski (2010, p. 31),

[A] humanistic-liberating education, from the Freirean perspective, must take as its starting point the concrete phenomena that constitute the existential universe of our people. And, from this universe, the dialogical-critical challenge converges on the struggle for the social transformations that are necessary and indispensable for us to achieve a more dignified life, especially for the social sectors that suffer the most from oppression or exclusion.

In this sense, we understand that, for Paulo Freire at that time, political education was synonymous with enabling working people of the 1960s to reflect on their condition as exploited-individuals within a capitalist context. Thus, this “new” way of thinking about education would create the conditions for individuals to reflect on their realities and their worlds, as well as on possible forms of resistance.

From this perspective, we draw on the concept of resistance as outlined by Oliveira (2021), arguing that the MEB implemented an emancipatory, questioning, civic-minded, and self-reflective educational practice for marginalized individuals and sectors, thereby challenging the interests of conservative, capitalist, and dominant forces. In its teaching, the MEB went beyond the repetition and memorization characteristic of traditional pedagogy. It employed other pedagogical practices, such as dialogue, reflection, critical analysis of reality, and awareness-raising. Furthermore, the study of context and reality became central to the educational process.

In light of these discussions, the article is organized into three sections: the first discusses the creation and development of the MEB as a program of basic (popular) education and its relevance to the history of education; the second section focuses on the organization of educational practices in radio schools and the analysis of documents, including the primer *Viver é Lutar* (To Live Is to Fight), discussing its written, reflective, and resistance-based accounts, which denounce the reality and sociocultural practices of that era; the final section develops an argument regarding the importance of the MEB letters written during that period as a means of communication and information about the educational and political events of the time.

2 The MEB: memories and reinterpretations of a popular practice

The early 1960s in Brazil were characterized by enthusiasm and more active political participation by various actors and social groups from diverse segments, sectors, and institutions. Among them, the actions of rural and urban collectives stand out, as they played a more significant role among the masses, fighting for a more just

and egalitarian society. It was against this backdrop that the educational initiatives of the popular education movements took root, prioritizing the awareness, politicization, and emancipation of individuals and breaking with the “banking” model of formal education (Freire, 1987), which paved the way for the desired changes. The late 1950s and early 1960s already foreshadowed such changes, particularly in education – among other fundamental reforms - which would be priorities under the João Goulart administration.

Freire’s principles for a liberating education – one that took into account art, culture, and popular knowledge, as well as the difficulties and aspirations of socioeconomically excluded individuals, and that sought to bring about positive social transformation of reality – guided the practices of the popular education movements of that era. It was the individual, embedded in their own time and space, who called for decoloniality in their daily practices and experiences.

According to Paludo (2015, p. 226), the mission of the popular education movement was to “[...] lead the effort to enable the people to become a political expression of themselves, through autonomous popular organizations imbued with the desire to build ‘popular power.’” Thus, politicized education was considered essential to the struggle and resistance of the working classes, aiming at achieving their autonomy and dignity. The MEB, therefore, sought to guide its target audience toward the exercise of citizenship and the reclaiming of dignity, developing educational materials that addressed the subjects’ daily lives and the abuses and disrespect they endured daily.

According to Oliveira (2021, p. 5), in that context, education had become an act of resistance, at odds with the prevailing economic order, as it played “[...] a fundamental role insofar as it emerges as a source of questioning [...]”; that is, what was established in the social and economic context of the students, along with the intentions behind the MEB’s educational practices, was reflected upon, discussed, and questioned as something no longer natural or arbitrarily constructed – or, furthermore, without regard for the possible social consequences and human suffering. Indeed, the high rate of illiteracy prevalent at that time fostered a mindset of common sense that normalized despotism and authoritarian attitudes.

In this regard, it became imperative to implement a basic education system that had already been advocated for and demanded in Brazil by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) since the 1950s. According to Fávero (2006, p. 3), basic education was understood as “[...] the fundamental minimum of theoretical and practical knowledge essential for poor populations in underdeveloped regions so that they could move toward development.”

This would be a premise underpinning the popular education movements¹ during that period, especially about the literacy of young people and adults from the working classes. From this perspective, the MEB was one such movement, created in 1961 by the CNBB with the goal of developing a basic education program through radio schools to serve regions considered underdeveloped, particularly in the North, Northeast, and Central-West regions of the country. It is worth noting that at that time, approximately 46% of the Brazilian population was illiterate, with the highest rates in the Northeast.

Thus, for this study, we defined the time frame as 1961 to 1964, considering 1961 as the year of the MEB’s creation and the years 1962 through 1964 as the period of its greatest activity, until the civil-military coup², which abolished various educational programs and forced the MEB to redirect its political and pedagogical efforts to continue operating, albeit on a reduced scale. We thus recognize the importance of the Catholic Church’s role in creating the Educational Project, as it was the only movement permitted to continue with the initiative, albeit with a shift in focus. However, even though its founders (both clergy and laity) were members of the Catholic Church, for the implementation and development of its educational initiatives, the MEB relied on financial and structural support from the federal government through an agreement signed between the CNBB, represented by Bishop José Vicente Távora³, then Archbishop of Aracaju, and the newly elected president of the republic, Jânio Quadros.

¹ Such as the Movimento de Cultura Popular do Recife (MCP) (MCP) and the “Pé no Chão Também se Aprende a Ler” Campaign in Natal, founded in 1961; the Campanha de Educação Popular da Paraíba (CEPLAR), founded in 1962; and the Popular Culture Centers, established in 1962 in Rio de Janeiro.

² The term used is based on the studies of Saviani (2008), who considers that the dictatorship (1964–1985) was a coup orchestrated by the business elite (civilians) and the military.

³ D. Távora (1910–1970) was a Brazilian Catholic bishop, born in Pernambuco. He served as auxiliary bishop in Rio de Janeiro from 1954 to 1957 and was archbishop of Aracaju, Sergipe, from 1960 to 1970.

The first agreement was formalized through Decree No. 50,370, dated March 21, 1961 (Brazil, 1961), which officially established the MEB as a Basic Education Program to operate in underdeveloped areas, such as the regions mentioned above. Subsequently, the agreement was renewed by Decree No. 52,267, dated July 17, 1963 (Brazil, 1963), which reaffirmed the federal government's support (represented by then-President João Goulart) for the MEB and addressed the expansion of the educational program to other developing areas nationwide.

In light of this, Guedes (2021, p. 46) points out that Decree No. 50,370 preceded the publication of the first Law on Guidelines and Bases for National Education (LDBEN), No. 4,024, which was subsequently enacted on December 20, 1961, by President João Goulart. Thus, the creation of the MEB “[...] should be considered a historic milestone and an important achievement for the education and literacy of adults from the lower socioeconomic classes, particularly rural populations.”

We also note that, according to Fávero (2006), with the support of the federal government, the MEB had implemented 7,353 radio schools by September 1963, covering 14 states by early 1964 and relying on 29 radio stations to broadcast its programs and classes. Furthermore, the results were considered positive, as, in the first five years of operation, approximately 320,000 students completed the literacy program.

It is in this sense that the history of the MEB becomes relevant to the history of Brazilian education, given that the memories of its educational experiences – focused, in particular, on the literacy of young people and adults living in rural areas – must be constantly revisited, recalled, researched, and investigated so that they are not silenced, erased, or forgotten. Revisiting the MEB and recalling its practices does not mean repeating a familiar narrative, but rather analyzing what has not been said – what has been forgotten – such as the educational practices of resistance and citizenship expressed in the primer. Let us consider Gagnebin's (2009, p. 55) understanding of the act of recollection:

Such recollection implies a certain asceticism in the activity of the historian who, rather than repeating what is remembered, opens up to the gaps, the holes, the forgotten, and the repressed, to articulate – with hesitations, stumbles, and incompleteness – that which has not yet been granted the right to either memory or words.

In this vein, we highlight memory as an indispensable element for the conservation and preservation of historical writing, of history itself, and also of its evolution, in which past and present engage in dialogue, interconnect, question, and revisit forgotten traces or fragments. Forgetfulness and recollection – whether intentional or not – are intrinsic to the act of constructing memory, in its dialectic and specificities.

Memory is life, always carried by living groups, and in this sense, it is in constant evolution, open to the dialectic of remembrance and forgetting, unaware of its successive distortions, and vulnerable to all forms of use and manipulation, susceptible to long periods of dormancy and sudden revitalization (Nora, 1993, p. 9).

Thus, revisiting the memories of educational practices that conceived of a popular education of the past - such as those of the MEB – becomes fundamental for reflecting on, reframing, adapting, and refining contemporary educational experiences. This understanding does not mean that we are repeating the past, but rather appropriating another history - the history of the MEB – as a proposal for resistance and citizenship that has yet to be analyzed. In this sense, contributions would be made to the education of youth and adults, building new educational experiences.

Now, amid the current proliferation of ideas and attitudes among part of the population that undermines citizenship, Brazilian democracy, dignity, and human rights, it is urgent to examine the legacy of educational practices whose conception of education combated a rote, alienated, and alienating form of education that failed to address the political and humanizing process of the individual. Such practices emphasized critical and reflective thinking aimed at the positive transformation of social subjects. These subjects – illiterate and lacking knowledge of reality – came to understand the importance of contextual literacy, critical thinking, and autonomy in the face of the adversities of the environment in which they lived. Thus, we maintain that

[the] pedagogical proposals of a social education movement can be directly linked to the present and future of education, not least because the influences of popular education, basic education, the contributions of Paulo Freire, and proposals for human and social advancement can be found both in the MEB and in contemporary national education (Meneses, 2017, p. 17).

It is, therefore, by revisiting the history of the MEB's educational practices that the history of Paulo Freire is also brought to life – a history whose legacy has been and

continues to be constantly attacked by groups within the ruling class and by conventional wisdom, which remain unaware of his significant contributions to the field of education. These groups attempt to silence and erase his pedagogical contributions, which are geared toward a critical reading of reality, as well as toward the raising of consciousness, politicization, and emancipation of individuals.

In this context, the relevance of Freire's conception stands out; in its essence, it considers the act of educating to be a political action that guides and directs pedagogical practice through dialogue. This perspective contributes to the development of students' critical and reflective abilities by encouraging them to examine the sociocultural context in which they are embedded, to question the issues that permeate their reality, and to direct their practices toward promoting positive social change.

Analyzing the history of the MEB and the legacy of its educational practices is also a political choice – a way to foster a sense of hope in the new practices of the present that are geared toward the holistic development of students. These practices, as the MEB's experience suggests, should emphasize students' active political participation in society, so that they do not perceive themselves merely as voters or minimally trained workers who are subjugated and/or subjected to the exploitation of their labor.

The MEB stands out in the history of Brazilian education, especially after the First National Meeting of Coordinators in 1962, because, in addition to providing a basic education, it incorporates into its educational process the raising of awareness, politicization, and emancipation of students. This process should begin with the recognition of their status as subjects who are exploited (by capitalism) and oppressed (by the ruling class) so that, once truly aware of their condition, they could reflect and collectively seek mechanisms for struggle, democratic and civic participation, and resistance to the oppressive capitalist system.

According to Rodrigues, Costa, and Gomes (2015, p. 14),

[t]he MEB took a clear stand in defense of the poorest and those deprived of privileges. For this Movement, legitimate education is that which goes beyond an integrative vision and becomes creative, in the sense of valuing the individual and their historical constitution as a cultural being. Thus, education would aim to enable the critical construction of knowledge and provide

students with the conditions to influence and bring about change in the community.

In the past, the MEB carried out its educational activities through radio lessons, using radio as its technological platform; in a sense, it employed distance learning. However, its target audience - young people and adults who were particularly interested in literacy - would gather in person at radio schools and were assisted by a volunteer instructor (usually a young person who lived near the radio school). Later, in 1963, newly literate students received an important educational resource, the primer *Viver é Lutar* (To Live Is to Fight), developed by a team of teacher-broadcasters and supervisors from the MEB.

In this vein, re-examinations of the MEB educational practices also offer reflections on current practices - on what needs to be improved or adapted, and on what is, in fact, significant for the formation of an individual who exercises full citizenship, respects democracy and the common good, and recognizes the various social injustices against the most vulnerable. An individual who organizes, mobilizes, and fights collectively to overcome arbitrariness and disrespect. We emphasize, therefore, that education can and must contribute to the betterment of society, to empathy and solidarity among people, and to the inclusion of all.

In this regard, in the next section, we will address the organizational history of the MEB and its key points. We will analyze its educational practices, challenges, and pedagogical intentions, considering the development of supplementary teaching materials and the documentary analysis of the primer *Viver é Lutar*.

3 MEB: from resistance to citizenship

According to Bittar (2019), recalling an event or occurrence experienced in the past means reflecting on it and developing a new perspective, highlighting its relevance and historical significance. It is in this sense that we advocate for and understand the act of remembrance; after all, no one would recall insignificant moments from their own life or from human history – rather, the opposite is true, with emphasis placed on significant events that are rich in meaning for the human journey and its growth.

Following this logic, recalling the educational practices of a popular education movement – implemented through radio schools – enables us today to guide a

rethinking of educational and pedagogical practices across various areas of distance learning in the country, with a view toward fostering learners' autonomy, emancipation, and citizenship, thereby ensuring resistance against any form of oppression. According to Scott (2000), the author responsible for developing the theory of social resistance, the meaning of the word "resistance" is understood as a counter-hegemonic force against all forms of repression, subordination, and denial of rights, expressed in social relations – which this study identifies as power relations.

Thus, as we reflect on the MEB – its organization, educational practices, pedagogical intentions, and teaching materials, particularly the primer *Viver é Lutar* – we understand that its historical trajectory is characterized by resistance, which intertwines with our political stances and empowers us to oppose the inhumane demands of the present, to dream, and to build a more just and humane future. From this perspective, we are not merely recalling an educational experience from the 1960s, but casting new perspectives beyond what the literature has left forgotten. We aim to fill in the blank pages of this history. Thus, resistance and citizenship emerge as key themes in this textual construction.

In this vein, delving into the organization of the MEB – specifically the document titled *General Instructions* drafted by the Movement itself – we present its structure and functioning:

1-Supervisors - individuals selected by the System's leadership, specially trained for this purpose, who will be responsible for the System's technical and administrative sectors. 2-Monitors - vital links between the recipients and the students. They form the backbone of organized reception. They will receive specialized training and must be intelligent and capable individuals, from any educational background, with the minimum requirement of being able to read and write, in order to carry out the instructions received from the radio teacher. The monitors enroll students, record attendance⁴, and submit monthly reports on the progress of their School. 3-The school - should operate during hours that are entirely suitable for the populations to be reached by the Radio School System. To set up a Radio School, one may use the "school group" room, the "parish hall," the "farmhouse," or even a room in the home of one of the local residents. This room must be equipped with the following materials for classes to take place: – tables or desks – chairs or benches – a blackboard – chalk and an eraser – a fixed radio – lanterns when there is no electricity (MEB, 1961, pp. 27–28).

⁴ In this excerpt and in other direct transcriptions, we observe grammatical deviations in accentuation; however, since these were in use at the time, we have chosen to preserve the original text as it appears in the source consulted.

The quote objectively and theoretically summarizes the operation of radio schools; however, the role of the teacher-broadcaster, who is included in item 1- “Supervisors, individuals selected and trained to develop scripts for radio programs and lessons” – was not explicitly addressed. What is the reason for this omission? This question arises from a curious fact: the students only heard the teacher-broadcasters but did not know them personally. In fact, Carvalho *et al.* (2009) highlight the expression “invisible teacher,” mentioned by a student in a letter sent to the MEB-RN Supervision Office, expressing gratitude for having already learned to read and write. For this reason, a high volume of letters was quite common. Many monitors and students invited the radio teachers to visit them; they wanted to express their gratitude for their teachings, for their encouragement during the radio lessons, and also for their dedicated efforts.

Through these narratives, we see the difficulties of educating, in this adverse context, young people and adults who had never held a pencil or pen, with “invisible” teachers, by the light of lanterns or oil lamps. On the other hand, they possessed life experiences and knew how to speak about the world in which they lived, guided in their reflections by the teachers. Thus, they discovered how to read words by reading the world.

As we have seen, radio schools were affordable and advantageous, since they could be established effortlessly in multiple locations, particularly in rural areas. Another educational aspect worth highlighting is the school schedule, which took into account the specific needs and work patterns of rural residents, with class times adapted to their realities. Strictly speaking, when analyzing the role of the monitors, it is notable that there was no separation (boundary) between school administrative work and teaching duties, since they were responsible for enrolling students, submitting monthly attendance reports, and, most importantly, assisting in the teaching and learning process.

From this perspective, we realize that MEB educational practices faced various challenges; however, for them to succeed, many efforts were combined; thus, the memories of its members and participants – recorded in official documents, lesson plans, radio scripts, letters from students and monitors, and other sources – reveal the arduous task of developing and maintaining the program. However, they also offer a

glimpse into stories of achievement and success among the students – people who were poor, exploited, and oppressed by the cruel dynamics of unchecked capitalism.

According to Fávero (2006), the lesson plans and educational program scripts were developed by the team of supervisors from the local systems, based on problem situations reported by the monitors. Furthermore, the language was also contextualized and more accessible to the students, incorporating elements of local or regional culture through the use of songs, poems, short stories, and popular sayings.

The classes, meanwhile, were broadcast during so-called “prime time” (given that radio was the most popular means of communication in that context): 6:30–7:30 p.m. (first-cycle class) and 8:00–8:30 p.m. (second-cycle class). According to Fávero (2006, p. 149), “these time slots were considered the most convenient for rural workers, and the broadcasts preceded or immediately followed *Voz do Brasil*, which was mandatory to rebroadcast at the time, from 7:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.” However, after September 1963, the federal government’s official news program was extended in duration and began airing from 8:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.; despite repeated requests from the MEB exempt educational broadcasters from the obligation to rebroadcast it, these efforts were unsuccessful. The fact is that, with this change, classes ended later, and many students dropped out; consequently, many schools were closed.

It is possible that, at that historical moment, this was intentional: for how could one educate people in rural areas or remote locations toward emancipation and a critical understanding of reality if compliance with dominant directives took precedence over these interests? Why promote citizenship if citizens could not exercise it?

The pedagogical work of MEB at the beginning of its creation was summarized by Fávero (2006, p. 264) in the central points below:

a) the establishment of radio schools became a pedagogical moment, fostering dialogue with groups and communities interested in transforming their reality; b) the training of monitors served as a powerful moment of awareness-raising; c) the monitor was elevated from the role of a mere assistant – standing beside a radio tuned to a dedicated frequency – in controlling and managing a group of students, to the role of facilitator of that group’s activities; d) The classes - at least when designed and broadcast by the most dynamic local teams - evolved into the analysis of problem situations, which were key to understanding capitalist exploitation and served as a tool for seeking and testing possible solutions; e) the broadcasts went beyond the scheduled class time, expanding into programs for and by the communities, such that an entire set of communication tools was put at the service of these groups.

We observed the use of keywords and expressions such as “dialogue,” “transformation of their reality,” “moment of heightened awareness,” “understanding of capitalist exploitation,” and “problem situations,” which exemplify how the MEB and other popular education movements engaged with Paulo Freire’s concepts and, thus, incorporated them into their pedagogical work and educational practices. Indeed, all these keywords demonstrate the intent and direction of the MEB’s educational practice. The promotion of dialogue, the discussion of problem situations, and the raising of awareness point toward the autonomy of individuals and an understanding of their reality, as well as toward resistance and the attainment of citizenship.

Lesson plans and guiding themes were aligned, whenever possible, with educational curricula, and, according to Carvalho *et al.* (2009, p. 88), at the MEB-RN, for example, slogans and pamphlets were produced, such as: “A politicized people is a free people,” “A politicized people can change their lives,” and “The vote is the people’s weapon.” We can see, through these slogans, the purpose of the MEB’s educational practices, since, while teaching literacy, it raised awareness among participants about the importance of political engagement as a means of liberation from oppression.

Thus, when considering Burke’s (1992) historiographical perspective – a “history from below” – we note that the history of the MEB was grounded in this type of historical narrative, as an analysis of sources – such as lesson plans and letters from monitors and students – produced by its participants reveals everyday life and popular history. Furthermore, the MEB left traces of educational practices that took into account the various social and economic problems faced by its students and monitors. These included difficulties associated with the precariousness or neglect of health care, education, culture, food insecurity, and adequate housing – that is, services that would guarantee basic rights to social welfare.

It was in this context that the primer *Viver é Lutar (To Live Is to Fight)* was created by the MEB’s own teachers and published in October 1963. In January 1964, the first batch of 50,000 booklets was printed and distributed to the school systems. This written source was analyzed in digital format (Portable Document Format, PDF) because we did not have access to the physical material; therefore, our analysis of aspects related to its physical form was limited. However, throughout this paper, we

will briefly address aspects related to its structure, format, composition, illustrations, and language.

The primer consisted of a total of 65 pages, and

[...] included, as a key component, a teaching kit - also titled “Viver é Lutar” – consisting of the teacher support books “Fundamentação,” “Justificação,” and “Mensagem,” and was developed by a working group composed of members of the National MEB and teachers from the movement who were active in the states of the Northeast Region. (Alves; Tonnetti, 2021, p. 3).

It consisted of 30 pages of reading texts, which formed the plot of the stories presented in this document (see Figure 1 below), and another 30 pages of grammatical notes and exercises that followed each story. The remaining 5 pages were divided among the front cover, back cover, the last photograph in the primer, the concluding narrative, and the afterword written by the authors. There is no catalog entry or table of contents. In total, the primer consisted of 34 images, including the cover and portraits (photographs) of the people, which wove the narrative of the stories and engaged the reader before the words began, preparing them for reading and for the content. With the exception of the cover—whose graphic design included dark green borders at the top and bottom – the remaining pages feature black-and-white photographs. As for the primer’s dimensions, we were unable to verify them; however, it appears to be the size of a standard letter-size or A4 sheet of paper, printed in landscape orientation.

The language (written text) and vocabulary used in the booklet are simple and contextualized, reflecting the daily lives of its target audience. The written text interacts with the photographs; thus, they complement each other and intentionally seek to draw the reader’s attention to the need to fight collectively for better living conditions.

According to Alves and Tonnetti (2021, p. 3):

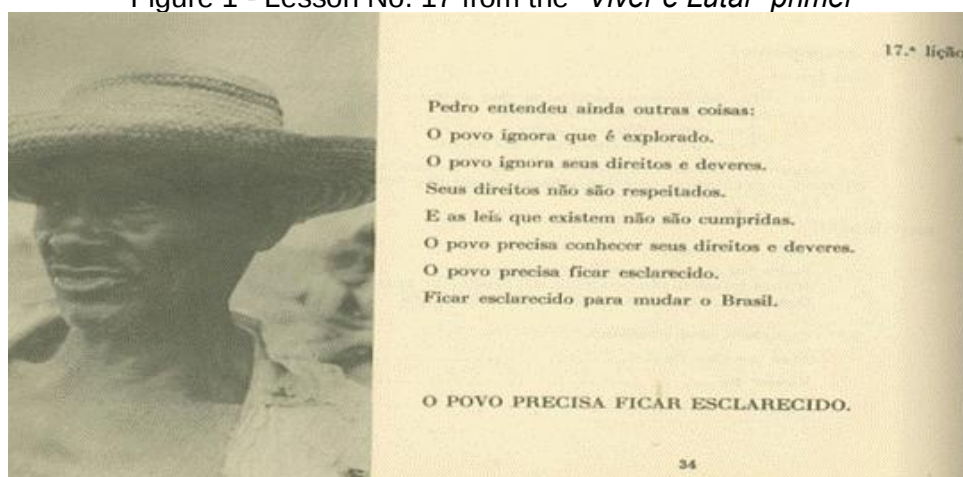
As soon as we open the primer, we are immediately invited to take part in a struggle that we will not wage alone, but in the company of someone we call by name – someone who is close by and who is likely walking alongside us. Together we are the people, who also struggle – more than that: as a people, we are the collective expression of that struggle. This is the opening poem of the primer *Viver é lutar (To Live Is to Struggle)*, which, from the very first lesson, sets the tone for the political perspective adopted by the teaching materials of the Movement for Basic Education (MEB) – a Catholic ecclesial movement organized with the purpose of teaching rural workers in the Brazilian countryside to read and write, in a context where illiterate people, denied their political rights, had no access to the vote.

As mentioned, this politicizing intent was evident in the very images that made up the primer. Each lesson consisted of an image that could be called a “portrait of life,” as it revealed the face of each individual/worker in that context, connecting with the lived reality of the readers. The pained faces, marked by the intense exhaustion of labor, which was at times inhumane and enslaving, depicted the situation of exploitation and the denial of dignity for every man and woman.

Each image was preceded by an introductory story that depicted the situation of the Brazilian people, aiming to politicize the student – that is, to encourage reflection on their place in a society where power lay in the hands of a small minority, the ruling class, as Silva and Cavalcante (2022, p. 44) explain: the primer *Viver é Lutar* guided “[...] workers toward a political awareness of their situation, based on lessons drawn from the living conditions and labor of the peasants, in addition to encouraging the engagement of these peasants.”

In Lesson nº. 17 of the booklet, on the left, we see the image of a man: his expression shows eyes half-closed, gazing diagonally to the left, a weary face marked by a life of hardship; on his skin, the sweat of a life marked by arduous farm labor; and on his head, a straw hat – characteristic of a man of the countryside – completes the stereotype of the 1960s worker.

Figure 1 - Lesson No. 17 from the “*Viver é Lutar*” primer



Source: MEB (1963, p. 34).

In this context, as we analyze the narratives of the *Viver é Lutar* primer, we come to understand how memories are constructed through a historical document that conveys discursive content and syntactic, iconographic, and aesthetic forms in support

of marginalized classes, offering new interpretations of these individuals' sociocultural realities (Stephanou; Bastos, 2005). Thus, the primer is not neutral; for us, it becomes a text denouncing an exploitative scenario and embodies the struggle of the progressive educational philosophy. These are strong, direct, and enlightening phrases – perhaps never heard before by the students - who identify with the imagery and recognize their own reality.

Furthermore, according to Costa, Rodriques, and Nascimento (2020), written documents, such as the primer in question, serve as a repository of data related to a specific time and place, providing visual representations of memories recorded in relation to what is said and unsaid, and revealing a process of reorganizing, rereading, reevaluating, and reconstructing meanings, written contexts, phrases, and words. These aspects demonstrate that all ideological, textual, and visual elements were organized and conveyed a meaning about the time experienced.

From this perspective, the primer explored, among other themes, the relationship between education and the political and social landscape, clarifying the inseparable link between the concepts of “educating” and “raising awareness” – characteristic of Paulo Freire’s pedagogy. Furthermore, it was not enough for a person to be literate; they needed to become aware of themselves and of their rights and duties as citizens. Similarly, Brandão (2017, p. 288) argues that the primer reflects Freire’s thinking, as he already understood that to achieve citizenship in that capitalist context, it was necessary to place “[...] education at the heart of culture and [...] culture in the arms of politics.”

In the text, the phrases “the people are unaware that they are exploited” and “the people need to know their rights and duties” reveal the inhumane reality to which the working class was subjected at that time. The people were unaware of their situation as an exploited class, having been cunningly conditioned to believe that the inevitability of poverty is a labyrinth from which they cannot escape. Determinism was present in their lives and their understanding of the world. In these phrases, we observe an awakening, a call to resistance: “to know one’s rights and duties”; for, once aware of their guarantees and obligations, people resist without fear or trepidation.

The phrase, “and the laws that exist are not enforced,” seeks to provoke the reader to question what those laws might be and why their enforcement existed only

on paper and not in everyday practice. We emphasize that, at that time, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) had already been published by the United Nations (UN), and this document clarifies that every individual, by virtue of being human, is born with the right to dignity, which is understood as respect for fundamental rights. However, for what purpose was this dignity denied to the destitute, since it was the right of every human being, simply by virtue of being human? We understand that, in an elitist society, values considered ethical are distorted and denied to the working class. Consequently, since they lack access to education and knowledge, their awareness of the degradation they suffer is normalized, and their citizenship and the rights granted to them as citizens are misrepresented and violated.

What set the primer apart began with its production; since it was developed by MEB teachers themselves, the language used, the storylines constructed, and the images presented spoke directly to the reality of each student – unlike the materials produced for youth and adults up to that point, which were “[...] considered inadequate due to their hollow and infantilized content” (Silva; Cavalcante, 2022, p. 44, emphasis added). The lessons in the MEB primer had a profound impact on the education of young people and adults at the time and on educational practices, as they revealed the reality people were living but had not yet recognized, presenting an awareness-raising and politicizing character that, as Santos (2014, p. 56) explains,

[a]mong these and other challenges, the reader abandoned the method of educating through memorization and repetition, thus adopting a process of raising awareness with a teaching approach aimed at addressing the real-life circumstances of the underdeveloped population – taking into account their economic, political, social, and educational conditions – and demonstrating that positive solutions can be found through concrete measures.

It is in this sense that the primer *Viver é Lutar* proposed an educational format that engaged in dialogue not only with the concept of literacy but also with the concepts of raising awareness and politicization. This integration aimed to provide individuals with the opportunity to see themselves as citizens, understanding that their role in society was not limited to voting, but rather to reflecting on themselves and their social reality – a reality marked by exploitation, injustice, and disrespect for human dignity. In light of this, Oliveira (2021, p. 6) reiterates that “the effort to unravel the webs of reality is too burdensome for those dominated by the culture industry.” Based on this understanding, the author argues that education, with a focus on resistance, seeks to

encourage an analysis of exploitative realities and to challenge the *status quo* to transform it.

Thus, the MEB's educational practices, within an educational landscape fraught with various difficulties, provided a time and space for emancipatory education, becoming an act of resistance within the strategic landscape of capitalism in the early 1960s. The teaching and learning process that unfolded stood in support of the people, the excluded, and the "forgotten," bringing human dignity into focus.

Thus, the aim is not to repeat this historical narrative, but to analyze the educational legacy of this Movement for the history of Brazilian education. Indeed, this experience helps us rethink our pedagogical practices in the present, resisting impositions that devalue the educational act, the educator, and the learner. It inspires educational practices with young people and adults, knowledge to be discussed, and the lived experience of Freirean teachings.

Thus, in order to contribute to the history of this Movement, we revisit – for reflection – letters written by MEB monitors to their supervisors. These letters already express the Movement's educational reality, its struggles, lessons learned, and the positions it has taken.

4 MEB Monitors and their letters: when remembrance is necessary

We begin this section by asking what it means to write letters and why we write them. We understand that, in the early 1960s, the act of writing letters was perhaps the only possible means of communication for those who were absent to remain present in the lives and journeys of family members and friends, sharing personal and public events. In this sense, the letter – whether handwritten or typed – was an important document, as it bore witness to routine, everyday situations or even new events related to a particular time, bearing in mind that the letters were kept as relics by the recipients, who, in most cases, could not read them and had to ask someone who was literate for help.

Knowing how to write a letter was considered a mark of wisdom and intelligence, and many wrote letters at the request of others to maintain communication. Thus, the MEB is defined by the characteristics of its era: caught between letters and the radio. At that time, it was not important that the person use the

language correctly; what mattered was that the writing be understood. This is evident in the letter sent by the MEB monitor from Grossos, Rio Grande do Norte, dated April 18, 1964, presented in this study.

From the letter, we can discern the monitor's educational background. She was illiterate, with incorrect writing - suggesting limited education and a lack of grammatical and linguistic knowledge - yet she was able to recount events and make herself understood. The letters reveal her concern and strict adherence to established rules, as seen in the next letter under study, in which the monitor does not hand over the MEB books to the mayor - ignoring his request - but instead gives them to the Movement's supervisor, since that is from whom she had received them.

It is interesting to note that the MEB's general instructions are controversial, as they stipulate that monitors should be intelligent and skilled individuals, yet at the same time, they may come from any educational background, with the minimum requirements being the ability to read, write, and follow the instructions of their superiors. In the quote below, we can observe these identifying characteristics of the monitors, noting that skill and intelligence were more important than formal education. It is clear that minimal intellectual requirements were set for monitors; what mattered was that they be "skilled and intelligent" in order to effectively convey the instructions they received. Note, then, what the *General Instructions* stated regarding this educational mediator:

2- Monitors - vital links between the broadcasters and the students. They constitute the cornerstone of organized reception. They will receive specialized training and must be intelligent and capable individuals, regardless of their educational background, with the minimum requirement of being able to read and write, in order to carry out the orders received from the teacher-broadcaster. The monitors enroll students, record attendance, and submit monthly reports on the progress of their school. (MEB, 1961, pp. 27-28).

This reality regarding the training of monitors highlights a troubling educational context in rural areas and regions far from major urban centers, revealing a lack of qualified individuals to work in a basic education program of great importance and broad geographic reach during the 1960s. However, despite these difficulties, the MEB achieved its intended goal by establishing a team responsible for supporting the Program and setting up classrooms and radio stations for broadcasting lessons.

Furthermore, according to studies by Fávero (2006) on the MEB-PE and by Carvalho *et al.* (2009) on the MEB-RN, the farther away from the capital, the more precarious the conditions of the radio schools were, since “[...] they were far from meeting the minimum essential requirements for a school to function: the location was lit by a kerosene lamp; it could be a room in the instructor’s home, a porch, a courtyard, or a trellis” (Carvalho *et al.*, 2009, p. 52) – difficulties that are evident in the letters sent to the team of supervisors. These documents reveal the power of memory to bring past impressions and information – including written ones (Le Goff, 1990) – into the present, expressing the movement’s routine educational practices and sharing the challenges, difficulties, and contributions of this popular educational experience, as manifested in the immediate present.

Drawing on the studies of Malatian (2009, p. 195), we consider the letters to be documents that reveal “[...] writing about oneself, in the first person, in which the individual takes a reflective stance regarding their history and the world in which they live.” Thus, the analyzed letters revealed a glimpse into the life stories and daily lives not only of the instructors but also of the students and the Movement itself.

For this study, we analyzed two letters written by teaching assistants, one from MEB/PE and the other from MEB/RN. Both letters were accessed in the Virtual Exhibition of the CEDIC/PUC/SP digital collection, in the folder titled *Correspondence from Students and Teachers*, more specifically in the *Correspondence Between Radio Schools* series, which consists of 53 pages, with most of the letters having been written in 1963. These letters contain various accounts from the student monitors. Their recollections mention everything from financial difficulties in maintaining the classes (such as buying batteries for the radio and gas for the lamp), to the students’ lack of interest and physical exhaustion; they also reveal the progress and performance of various students, as well as the concern that they could not help any further, noting that some instructors also had doubts and did not know how to better explain (didactically) certain content or concepts.

Because they were closer to the students, the instructors understood their reality, their work practices, and their difficulties in learning to read and write, in understanding their place in the world, and in exercising their rights and duties. Thanks

to the instructors' knowledge of the students, the teaching methods were more attuned to the workers' needs, even though they were challenging given the circumstances.

Thus, the letter from monitor Luzinete Cordeiro de Oliveira, from Grossos, Rio Grande do Norte, dated April 18, 1964 – eighteen days after the military coup – already signals the end of the Popular Education Movements. The order to collect the books was carried out, but the fact that the materials were not handed over to city hall demonstrates both the hollowing out of the movement and, on the other hand, the instructor's resistance in refusing to obey the mayor's directive. Now, from which document would the students learn to read, if the reading book was their guide? On the radio, there was only listening. It is also interesting to note, in the letter, the instructor's remarks about communism, which reveal a lack of knowledge and a rigid understanding – that is, the prevailing understanding of that political ideology at the time. Note: “[...] with all this talk of communism” (Oliveira, 1964, p. 48), the radio schools would face complications because of the books. Was it just because of the books? What was different about the books? Yes, she already understood – even though she lacked certain knowledge – that the book led students beyond their reality of oppression toward emancipation and liberation from oppressive conditions. We observe that the letter, as a historical source, draws the reader into the history and context of an era – the ideas propagated and internalized by the population – in which the fear of communism manifested itself in discourses and social relations, instilling deep apprehension and fear in the working classes, who were unaware of the reality of the situation. From this perspective, the MEB letters serve as important documents for interpreting and analyzing their history. Thus, it is possible that the monitor feared being associated with communism or subversion and therefore collected the books. On the other hand, she refused to return them to city hall and wrote a letter to her supervisor, reporting the incident and asking for guidance. This stance already demonstrates autonomy, emancipation, and resistance to oppressive conditions.

In this interpretation, by presenting these memories, it is believed that the restorative sense of memory is being developed as an exercise for citizenship, for the empowerment of rights. Thus, upon revisiting the memories of the monitors in their letters, duly guided by the supervisors, it is perceived that they already possessed or were building a critical awareness of reality, with the help of the lessons present in the

reading book. Now, at the beginning of the dictatorship, it is noticeable that the fear, insecurity, and systemic oppression imposed by the dictatorial regime were already manifesting, as well as observing the confrontation and resistance of the monitors to keep the radio schools functioning.

From this perspective, the letters bring representations of the insecurity that was beginning to mark the lives and work of the monitors and, also, the students. The letters reveal threats against the monitor, especially regarding the delivery of the primers, and the refusal to deliver them without MEB's authorization, constituting an act of resistance.

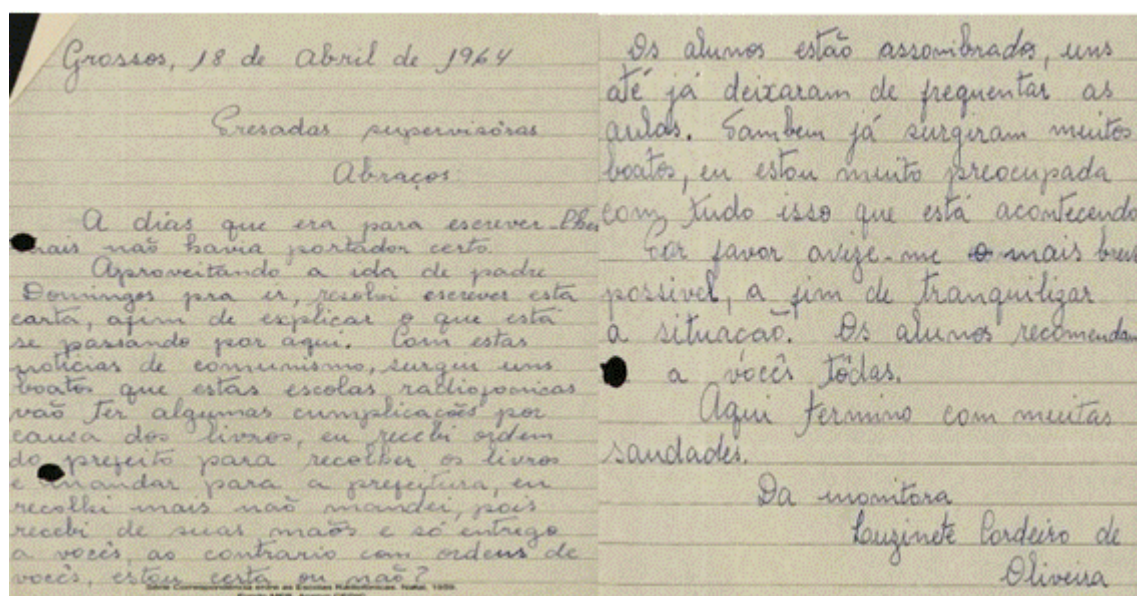
It is known that remembering the past does not "[...] mean knowing it as it actually was." It means appropriating a reminiscence, just as it flashes in a moment of danger. [...] And, finally, it is dangerous, as it reignites a hermeneutic battle over the meaning of the past" (Silva Filho, 2008, p. 160). Thus, in the appropriation of reminiscences about the MEB, such as its lessons and letters, the historical practice transforms, presenting other perspectives and interpretations, adopting a critical stance, based on forgotten gaps and remnants. In this "[...] effort to better understand [...]" history, we understand, like Bloch, that it is "[...] a thing in motion." (Bloch, 2001, p. 46).

Thus, the articulation with the past tense can bring to light this historical movement, the dispute over memories and interpretations, a social process that includes many voices and experiences. Thus, in the sent letter, the monitor's voice is heard and felt, fearful, denouncing the authoritarian actions of the dictatorship and recent events, a history that had not been previously addressed and is considered in this study as a "discovery." In the following quote, we perceive the reasons for the sender's fear:

Among these imminent dangers, we recall the fear that many Brazilians had during the dictatorial years, 1964 – 1985, of being associated with subversion, not for subverting the order, but for the consequences that this subversion would bring to their lives. Many resisted, and with that, we reached the years of redemocratization. However, until the redemocratization, rights were denied and violated, as dehumanization was included in the authoritarian process, manifested in the form of physical and/or psychological violations, through repression, torture, exile, death, and disappearances (Santos; Carvalho, 2019, p. 88)

We observed in the letter that such fears were already taking place, with the "news of communism" addressed by the monitor. We noticed that this news reached the population through the radio, written newspapers, letters, and ready-made and repeated narratives. Let's read the letter below and consider its content and the way letters were written at the time:

Figure 2 - Monitor Luzinete Cordeiro de Oliveira's letter



Source: Oliveira (1964).

The letter presented below was transcribed, considering that its content was almost illegible or difficult to see. However, the themes are identical. It is the letter from the monitor Alice Pereira da Silva, from Sítio Penedo, in Salgueiro/PE, dated May 15, 1964. Consider the excerpt⁵, below:

[...] here in Salgueiro, there is a *Captan* of the army. So he received a telegram, from a general of the army; asking him to take from the monitors, the books of the radiophonic schools [...] *he sent for me show me the telegram* and a few books, of those from class B. And asked for me to bring mine, *saying he*, that nobody could *succed*, that this school is of communism. Then I answered to him, how is it that this school is communist, that *who deals with it is the Priests*; and the most religious people. *Bicause* of this *newness*, I am still not teaching [...] *I comunicate* you waiting for a reply as *brief* [...] (Silva, 1964, p. 35-36).

⁵ In this excerpt, we note grammatical deviations in accentuation and spelling in the direct transcription; we have chosen to preserve the original text as it appears in the source consulted.

The letter presents the same characteristics as the previous one: a still preliminary writing, but it manages to convey the events and necessary information. The letter conveys a similar concern: the presence of communism in books and at school. Consequently, the order to collect them was given as the school was not in operation, and the monitor was not teaching. But she questions it, doubting the issue of the school being communist if the priests were responsible for it. In her understanding, the religious could not be communists.

Well, how to demystify this discourse? It is claimed that the coup was planned and put into practice to prevent communism from taking hold in Brazil. This was the reason given to the populations who, for the most part illiterate, believed in and supported the military coup. With that, all Popular Education Movements were extinguished; however, the MEB remained, resisting, because it renounced the discourse of awareness and emancipation of the popular masses, assuming the sole purpose of teaching reading and writing. And the letters from the monitors reveal the early times of concern for the MEB under the new regime. Note what the authors state below:

Some groups that, before the civil-military dictatorship, managed to develop work aimed at valuing popular culture and improving the quality of life, mainly through education and awareness, were persecuted and extinguished. The minority that managed to remain active, such as the Base Education Movement - MEB, had to reorganize and began to have their collections and teaching methods monitored by the military (Santos; Carvalho, 2019, p. 89)

It is in this sense that the relevance of remembering and the danger of erasing memories is placed, for if it weren't for the few remaining files about the MEB, ignorance of the facts and a single story would prevail. In this sense, we perceive the necessity and relevance of re-reading the past and rewriting history. The historian must seek the traces and vestiges left behind, problematize them, interpret them, for, according to Febvre, history is "[...] the daughter of its time" (Bloch, 2001, p. 7)

5 Conclusions and implications

Analyzing the educational practices of the MEB, understanding its legacy to reflect on new possibilities of education, especially for rural areas and their senses of awareness and resistance, led us to (re)think the three-dimensional relationship between past, present, and future, their connections, relationships, continuities, and

ruptures. This popular education movement, with all its specificities, contributed to the education/consciousness of individuals who, possibly, in that context, would not have access to and opportunity for the construction of knowledge. The Movement enabled the people, through awareness and reading of the world, to re-signify their social realities and awaken to transform them, possessing, as indispensable axes, citizenship, human dignity, and the right to vote. The MEB thus presents to us the history of a time when rights were still unknown to those populations. Consequently, the emphasis on resistance and citizenship is experienced in educational practices.

In this sense, when we approach the *past*, we understand that the primer *Viver é Lutar (To live is to Fight)* in the 1960s, becomes an innovative educational tool, with the aim of proposing didactic material produced especially for young people and adults in the countryside. In this way, the primer assisted in radio classes, unveiled their harsh realities, fostered discussions to make them reflect on themselves, their work, their social, labor, and political conditions, on others (the collective), and the world as a whole. Thus, in every word, figure, phrase, composition, and text, the primer took a stance in favor of the emancipation and struggle of workers, both men and women, for better living conditions. In this perspective, the letters from the monitors suggest a courageous and challenging stance, of denunciation, resistance, and also a lack of awareness of the events.

It is indeed true that, when we recall this basic education program, we naturally reflect on the present. And perhaps, this is one of the main functions of the History of Education and essential for the moment we are experiencing, the post-COVID-19 pandemic period, which had as its main educational legacy the expansion and consolidation of distance learning and the debut of a new modality: hybrid education, characterized by the integration of the teaching and learning process in physical and online spaces, adding to historical problems, such as the dichotomy of investments between urban education, especially in major financial centers, and rural education, with impasses in teacher training and the precariousness of the school structure.

Following these perspectives and reflecting on the educational practices of MEB, we understand that men, as rational, emotional, and sensitive beings, have expectations and try at all costs to project the future, considering experiences from the past and the present. In this sense, the mebean educational knowledge, reinterpreted,

can guide present and future experiences, educating the population for autonomy and resistance to oppression and disrespect.

Finally, the memories of these practices allow us to think about the future, weaving together hope, tolerance, and the feasible newness of Paulo Freire, in recognizing people as historical subjects and in the construction and realization of a fairer world. We believe in the advancement of a global national education, where human characteristics, capacities, and diversities are valued, regardless of socioeconomic aspects. We dream of an active collective citizenship that respects human dignity. Thus, this writing sought to fulfill its proposal by analyzing obscured or forgotten aspects of the educational experience with young people and adults, developed in the early 1960s, presenting a new perspective on the facts, delving into their interpretation. The dialogue that the historian develops with their sources transports them beyond the spoken word to the resumption and writing of history in motion.

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