Teacher Education for Social Transformation and its Links to Progressive Social Movements: The case of the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil[1]

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Abstract

This paper discusses the experience of a teacher education program that has been developed by the Landless Workers Movement (MST), one of the largest and most important social movements in contemporary Latin America. The MST has struggled for agrarian reform as well as social and economic justice in Brazil. One of the lessons that the MST has learned from its history in Brazil is that it is not enough to struggle only for land. Education is also a quite important dimension of the MST's struggles. The MST's pedagogy is linked to collective work and the construction of humanist and socialist values. The movement has established pre-service and in-service teacher education programs for those who teach at schools in its settlements and encampments. This paper discusses, then, the challenges and possibilities of teacher education programs linked to progressive social movements in their attempts to implement an effective social justice agenda.

Keywords: Teacher education; social justice; progressive social movements; Brazil

Introduction

The *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Workers Movement), or simply the MST, is one of the largest and most important social movements in contemporary Latin America and one of the most successful grassroots movements in the world. In its twenty years of existence[3], the MST has struggled for agrarian

reform as well as social and economic justice in Brazil, achieving quite impressive results.

The movement is made up of people from some of the poorest segments of Brazilian society[4]. It mobilizes what Bales (1999), in the context of the current global economy, calls "disposable people."[5] The landless people are peasants whose lands have been expropriated and who have been excluded from other basic rights of citizenship. They are also rural workers and unemployed people who struggle to be reintegrated into the labor markets and social arenas from which they have been expelled as a result of the unequal process of capitalism development (Fernandes, 2000; Wright & Wolford, 2003).

The landless people in Brazil struggle not simply for land but for all the basic conditions of human existence. The Landless Workers Movement has three main goals: 1) to redistribute land to those who work it; 2) to achieve agrarian reform - which the movement considers to be much broader and more complex than land redistribution, and which must entail the attainment of the full scope of social rights that define full citizenship; 3) to build a socialist society.

The utopian vision of building a different society, a socialist society[6], is indeed in the mind of many MST's activists, as can be seen through one of my interviewees' statements: "We, who are from the MST, would like to show we want to construct another society. This is our utopia: to construct a different society."[7]

Actually, for the women and men who participate in the MST, there is no other alternative but to struggle for deep, structural transformations in Brazilian society. It is clear to them that the simple "reforms" of the current capitalist model of society would only postpone their suffering to some point in the future, leading them once again to the same situation of exclusion that first impelled them to establish this mass social movement.

The exclusion of the landless rural workers is the result of a history of huge inequalities generated by the development of capitalism in Brazil. Even facing huge difficulties and serious challenges, the landless people resist exploitation and expropriation and have been contributing to the transformation of social and economic

reality in Brazil. They have developed and expanded by making mistakes, overcoming problems, and dealing with different issues as the political landscape changes.

Although conservative groups and the mainstream media in Brazil accuse the MST of being a major threat to Brazilian democracy, if one conceives of democracy in terms of social justice, equality, and shared power, "one could argue that the sort of revolution the MST supports is exactly what Brazilian democracy needs in order to become truly democratic" (Wright & Wolford, 2003, pp. 314-315).

Finally, the landless people are not only excluded from their lands, but also from other basic rights of citizenship. In order to conquer these rights, they have understood that the struggle for land is linked to the struggle for living with dignity. Through their struggles, they seek to trample other fences beyond those of the *latifundium*. Knocking down the invisible yet powerful fence around knowledge, through an ambitious educational project, is another challenge facing the MST. This specific topic - the MST's educational work - will be briefly discussed in the next section.

An Overview of the MST's Educational Work

One of the principal lessons that the Landless Workers Movement has learned from its history in Brazil is that it is not enough to struggle only for land. Education is another central dimension of the MST's struggles. Due to the high rates of illiteracy and low rates of schooling in the *acampamentos* (encampments) and *assentamentos* (settlements), the landless families consider formal education and schooling crucial. However, for the MST, education is not restricted to school and classroom. One's involvement with the entire movement is already considered the greater "school."

The MST's pedagogy, closely linked to a collective work ethic and the construction of humanist and socialist values, has been developing since the 1980s when the MST's education committees began discussing educational issues with the landless communities. The movement has also established pre-service and in-service teacher education programs for those who teach at schools in its settlements and encampments.

The educational principles of the MST have emerged from its *praxis* (practice and theory combined)[8]. They have been established collectively through what the movement calls "*método de princípios*" ("method of principles"). The main purpose of this method is "to transform the accumulated lessons of all prior experiences and discussions into pedagogical principles that could lead (without prescribing) the educational work in all encampments and settlements in the country" (Caldart, 2000, p. 166).

The MST does not follow a unique pedagogy or an educational theory developed by a specific thinker. It constitutes itself as a pedagogical subject that incorporates various pedagogies and elements from many educational currents, adapting and modifying them according to people's needs in each settlement and encampment (Caldart, 2000; Harnecker, 2002).

A crucial aspect of the MST education project is that landless people must become subjects of their own pedagogy. The process of transforming people into educators who reflect upon their own education takes place through a permanent relationship between theory and practice. It is also a direct consequence of the "fact that people are part of a social movement." Thus, "the landless people of the MST are not only the subjects of an educational experience and human development, but also challenge themselves to become the subjects of theoretical reflection upon the pedagogy that they live" (Harnecker, 2002; Caldart, 2000, p. 54).

As mentioned above, although this pedagogy goes beyond the school, it also passes through the school. However, in order that the school incorporates the MST's pedagogy, there has to be a process of what the movement calls "school occupation."

The MST uses the term "school occupation" because the strategy landless people employ to force the state or the municipality to provide schools for their children is very similar to the one they use in order to get land. By occupying the school, the movement means "establishing the school first, beginning the work and the formal enrollments that they know are mandatory, despite precarious material conditions, and thus initiating the negotiations with the government in order to legalize the school." The movement knows that if it starts first negotiating with local governments, the

process of establishing a school may take months or even years (Caldart, 2000; Harnecker, 2002).

One of my interviewees told me about her experience of helping to establish a school in one of the MST's encampments, more specifically, in an old stable, by following the movement's strategy of "occupying the school:"

> It was amazing! I've learned a lot from this experience. I had learned from my participation in the union and the party that we should first negotiate in order to win something. However, in the movement, the logic is just the opposite. First we conquer, we do something and so we start negotiating in order to keep that conquest. And in these terms, the establishment of the school wasn't anything different. We cleaned up the whole stable, decorated it, and so established the school there. So, we registered and enrolled all the kids, who were living in the camp, at the school. After doing that, we started negotiating the formal establishment of the school with the authorities in the town. But again, we did that after the school was already functioning.
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> [...]
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> I was trembling. I had never participated in a negotiation like this before. So, I said to the Municipal Educational Secretary: "I don't know how to use beautiful words, but I am really excited about seeing the kids studying at the school. We have already started planting a beautiful garden over there. They are learning Math through the lettuce and onion gardens. It is amazing! Madam, this experience has to go on."

Caldart (2000; 2003b) discusses three other meanings of "school occupation" in the movement. First, because, as mentioned above, the landless families have mobilized themselves in order to struggle for the right to attend school, "school occupation" means the process of ensuring the extension of the social right to attend school to landless people. Second, the movement has taken on the task of organizing and articulating this mobilization in an organic way, producing a specific pedagogical project in the schools that have been conquered and training educators in a way that they can work toward this perspective. Thus, "school occupation" also means a planned and systematic process of incorporating the school into the movement's dynamic. Third, because the school is also seen as a political matter, "school occupation" means that the school is part of the strategy of struggling for agrarian reform, linking the movement's general concerns to its participants' political development.

There are tensions and conflicts in this process. As other interviewees argue, the "school occupation" process is more complex and longer than the process of occupying *latifundia*. According to these educators:

> It is easier to knock down a latifundium fence than to overcome the invisible fence around knowledge.

> It is very easy to knock down a latifundium fence. However, it is very difficult to knock down the other "fences" of exclusion. For instance, the "educational fence" is very hard to knock down. Knowledge has been very concentrated...

Caldart (2000) states that traditional schooling and the movement demonstrate logics that contradict one another. Their identities are usually conflicting identities. On the one hand, as mentioned above, the MST, as a progressive social and cultural movement, increasingly insists upon humanist and socialist values in education. On the other hand, traditional schools usually subordinate themselves to the immediacy of market demands. For instance, in her research, Ribeiro (2001) found that parents and teachers in some settlement schools seemed to agree that it is really difficult to introduce cooperative relationships in teaching, even in the MST's schools, because school tends to promote competition, individualism and submission.

As also mentioned above, in the MST's educational work, the children and the teachers are conceived as "pedagogical subjects." They are seen as privileged links in the dialogue between the movement and the school (Beltrame, 2000).

The active participation of the MST children, who are also called the *Sem Terrinha* (little landless ones)[9], is a crucial element in the movement's educational work. Although the movement wishes to avoid transforming the pupils into premature adults, the MST strongly supports its children's active participation in the movement and, more specifically, in their schools. There have been different ways for children's participation in the MST. As one of my interviewees puts it:

> The Sem Terrinha is in the MST because of her/his father and mother... The children are there for the occupation, they are there when evictions occur, they are there when the Sem Terra [the adult] is arrested, and for the mobilization... so, they are together and the little kids also participate in this process. The little kids are not appendages; they are an important part of the process and they have to be understood as subjects in this process, while recognizing that they have a

> different role... So, it is really important that the kids realize they are part of a struggle and this is one of the reasons that their school has to be different...

Caldart (2000) states that, since the very beginning, the children have been an important part of the movement's dynamic through their participation, with their parents, in important MST actions such as mobilizations, demonstrations, and even land occupations. Moreover, the author argues, children have also been able to create their own space in the movement. They have organized themselves in order to demand their rights and make negotiations in their own communities.

Harnecker (2002) states that in settlements where work is organized in a collective way, the children often feel motivated to create their own organization. The author cites one settlement where "the children got used to holding weekly assemblies to analyze their daily problems and distribute the tasks they could take on in the settlement" (p. 92). In her opinion, these experiences make it easy for the school to be a miniature organization of the committees and work teams in the encampments and settlements.

Children's active participation also takes place at their schools. For instance, they may put pressure on teachers to change the curriculum to connect it more closely to their lives and realities. In Caldart's opinion, the children "are ready to assume their condition as subjects and, who knows, lead themselves in the process of occupying the school" (2000, p. 173).

Since 1996, the MST has organized an annual meeting - the *Encontro dos Sem Terrinha* (meeting of the little landless ones) - which, according to Wright and Wolford (2003), "brings together the children of MST settlers and educates them about the ongoing struggle for the land" (p. 333).

One of my interviewees told me a bit about the entire process of organizing the *Encontro dos Sem Terrinha* in the state of Pernambuco. According to her, one topic is chosen each year and the children work on this topic at the schools, writing essays, drawing pictures, doing research, and discussing the subject with their classmates. At the end of the year, usually in October, the kids attend this meeting and share their ideas and their opinions. She assessed how this process has taken place in the movement. She explains:

> Of course there is a purpose to this activity. All of our activities have intentionality. When we think about this meeting, we think about what we have to do before, during, and after it takes place. The "before," which is the preparation process, and the "during," which is the three-day meeting, have been very rich; however, we have had problems with the "after." Unfortunately, the teachers have not been able to explore and take advantage of the experiences which the kids have had during these three days.

The MST also emphasizes the importance of teachers' participation in the movement and their active involvement in the community. Caldart (2000) states that the MST's history of schooling has had the transformative effect of giving these teachers a specific collective identity that goes beyond their profession without abandon it. To be a *Sem Terra* teacher, as Caldart argues, means to have "an identity that has been constructed simultaneously with the MST's progressive 'occupation' of the school" (p. 187).

According to the author, "*Sem Terra* teacher" is the name that can be given to an MST character who within herself[10] combines three different identity components:

> first, the condition of being a woman and the whole grid of meanings that this implies from a human, social, political, and historical point of view; second, her professional identity as an educator; and third her participation in an organization that struggles for land and that, in turn, produces new meanings for her condition as both a woman and an educator (p. 187).

Caldart argues that at the same time that the MST is able to shape the educator's new identity, the emergence of the *Sem Terra* teachers leads to new characteristics for the movement's identity as well. One of the results of the construction of this new collective identity for teachers has been a significant increase in women's participation in the MST (see also Diniz-Pereira, 2005).

The teachers - more specifically, the female teachers - who began to participate in the MST as the wives of landless rural workers, brought a serious concern about the teaching profession to the larger struggle over land. According to Caldart (2000), "In the same sense that, earlier, [they] were important actors pressuring the MST to struggle for schools, [they] continue on the stage today, pressuring the MST to create more space for education on its agenda" (p. 186).

McCowan (2003) states that although the MST's national education committee formulates the principal orientations of the movement's educative work, and coordinators at the state and regional levels play the chief role in enforcing them, "teachers do have influence on pedagogical and organizational decision-making in schools" (p. 8). He argues that teacher participation seems to have a dual function in the MST: "firstly the 'organizational' aspect, creating a cooperative and efficient body of workers, and secondly to increase their identification with and commitment to the community and the movement" (p. 8).

At the beginning of the MST's history of education, there was a tendency to have tensions and conflicts concerning "inside" teachers versus "outside" teachers. The movement soon realized that the inside/outside difference should not be seen in absolute terms. The point was not to exclude all those teachers who did not live in the settlements or encampments, but to demand that each teacher - no matter where s/he came from - be truly engaged with the children and the community (Harnecker, 2002).

As mentioned above, the movement has highlighted teacher education as another crucial activity and strategy within its educational work. This topic, as the main topic of this paper, will be discussed separately in the next sections.

The MST's teacher education program

Among the MST's educational actions, teacher education is indeed one of its priorities. In the MST's view, teacher education should not be restricted to attending a training program[11]. Actually, the movement considers its "teacher education program" as a set of several strategies and educative practices that includes attendance in a "pre-service" teacher-training program. Similar to its entire educational project, the MST's teacher education program is also politically committed to a broader strategy of social transformation.

The MST's educational and teaching principles are presented in the three main dimensions of its teacher education program:

- Technical and professional preparation: It promotes scientific and practical knowledge, skills, behavior, care, and ethical attitudes regarding thinking and

doing education, with special attention to the needs of rural areas, agrarian reform and social justice;

- Political preparation: It entails the development of an historical and class consciousness to help educators understand that their practices are linked to a larger purpose of positive social transformation;
- Cultural preparation: It emphasizes being able to creatively organize and build a culture of cooperation and solidarity (Caldart, 1997).

From these three dimensions of its teacher education program, it is possible to discern the MST's political and ideological intention toward a structural transformation of Brazilian society. Actually, it is difficult to separate the major goals of the movement, in terms of promoting agrarian reform and social justice, from its educational objectives. They are completely interwoven. Even the technical and professional dimension of this program has a clear connection to its broader political purpose. In an attempt to overcome the isolation and apolitical character of schoolteachers, the MST also tries to promote *collaborative teacher research* in its schools. Grounded in Freirean ideas, research is conceived here as a mutual process for students and teachers to question existing knowledge, power, and conditions[12]. Thus, community research by teachers, with students as co-investigators, establishes a student-centered, democratic process through which curriculum is built from the bottom up rather than from the top down[13].

Therefore, the MST intends to construct a teacher identity that is not neutral. It is rather a professional identity that is explicitly committed to social justice. Rather than reinforcing individualism in teaching, this professional identity is developed through experiences of solidarity and collective work.

In the MST's teacher education program, there is a multiplicity of initiatives that take place at the local, regional, state, and national levels and that represent fundamental spaces both for the pedagogical and political growth of the teachers and for the acquisition of knowledge to be socialized in the classroom (Beltrame, 2000, p. 139).

As I will discuss below, there are many strategies and activities that the movement considers to be part of its teacher education program. Examples include: participation in the collective struggles of the MST's education committees; systematization of

pedagogical practices; participation in collective production and socialization of materials for the MST's educational project; attending and participating in meetings, seminars, workshops and short courses; and so forth.

MST's "pre-service" teacher-training programs[14]

There are two different types of formal "pre-service" teacher-training programs in the MST. Both are responsible for preparing and certifying elementary schoolteachers for the movement. One of these programs, the *Magistério*, is taken at the high school level; the other one is called *Pedagogia da Terra*, and it is taken at the college level. Both programs are divided in two parts: *Tempo Escola* (School Time) is the period of time when the student teachers get involved in academic and political discussions about teaching and education, take several academic courses, participate in political discussions, and study the movement's materials; and *Tempo Comunidade* (Community Time) is the period of time when the "student teachers" stay at a school in one of the MST's settlements or encampments and become involved with a set of activities in the community.

1. The MST's "pre-service" teacher-training program at the high-school level (*Magistério*)

The MST's teacher-training program at the high-school level (*Magistério*) has been developed since 1990. Its main goal is to train and certify elementary schoolteachers and educators who are teaching at schools in the MST's encampments and settlements.

In terms of its legal situation, this teacher-training program is a high-school level adult education program that provides an elementary teacher certification for the attendees.

The total duration of this program is two and a half years. As mentioned above, it is split in two parts: In the first part, or what the MST calls *Tempo-Escola* (School Time), the student teachers must attend classes (six hours a day) during the school vacations[15] and get involved in many other pedagogical activities, including participation in the self-management of the program. Portuguese, mathematics, and

methods are among the required academic courses. The structure and dynamics of Brazil's political conjuncture and the history and goals of the movement are some of the political issues that are debated. According to Caldart (1997), the *Tempo-Escola* (School Time) is divided in three smaller "*tempos*" ("times"):

- "Times" linked to the official curricular development of the program: attending classes (six hours a day); attending and participating in seminars for the studying and discussion of specific topics (two or three hours per week); individual and collective reading (around 30 minutes a day); keeping a diary (20 minutes each day); and physical education activities (also 20 minutes a day).
- "Times" linked to the self-management of the program and the development of specific skills: working in the committees created to manage the program; attending workshops and short courses for developing specific skills needed for the self-management of the program; attending and participating in meetings and assemblies which are part of the collective administration of the program.
- "Times" linked to the cultural development of the group: celebration of the mística (spirit or spirituality/dramatization)[16]; individual and collective entertainment; keeping informed through the news; attending parties; visiting other places in the region; artistic workshops and so forth.

In the second part of the program, or what the movement calls *Tempo-Comunidade* (Community Time) the student teachers develop interdisciplinary activities that are socially useful to the community. Drawing upon Caldart (1997), the *Tempo-Comunidade* (Community Time) is divided into the following five smaller "*tempos*" ("times"):

- "Time" to continue the work they have been doing for the community, but now reflecting upon their pedagogical actions and taking notes about their practices (keeping a journal);
- "Time" for putting into practice different pedagogical activities, experiencing methodological challenges in each of the MST's educational frentes (fronts);
- "Time" to begin to do research activities that will culminate in a Trabalho de Pesquisa-Ação (Action-Research Project), the TPA. Student teachers will then

write a final report (Monografia) on their research and present it to their teacher educators and classmates in the program.

- "Time" to develop additional involvement in community activities in order to deepen their knowledge about the broader reality of the settlement or encampment and to cultivate "an ethic of engaging, commitment, and solidarity."
- "Time" to apply the collective self-management logic that they have experienced during the Tempo-Escola (School Time) to their schools.

The main purposes of the MST's "pre-service" teacher-training program at the high-school level (*Magistério*) are: 1. to train agrarian reform educators[17] with technical skills to work in the MST; 2. to train and certify teachers to teach in settlements and encampments schools; 3. to continue the construction of the MST's educational project and a specific pedagogy for the schools in the Brazilian countryside.

The MST's educators who attend this program are chosen through a selection process that takes place at the state level and adheres to certain criteria, such as: candidates be at least eighteen years old and have graduated from elementary school[18]; they must be involved in developing some educational activity in settlements or encampments; they must be recommended by the community or any other level of the MST organization; and finally, they must be committed to the continuation of their educational work in the settlements or encampments after graduation.

2. The MST's "pre-service" teacher-training program at the college level (*Pedagogia da Terra*)

Like the high-school program, the MST's "pre-service" teacher-training program at the college level (*Pedagogia da Terra*)[19] is divided in two parts: *Tempo Escola* (School Time) and *Tempo Comunidade* (Community Time). Besides taking academic courses, the "student teachers" also discuss political issues and study the MST educational materials during the *Tempo Escola* (School Time). In the *Tempo Comunidade* (Community Time), they read other materials, do "*concrete activities*" at the schools, keep a journal and participate in an action-research project. The program was established in order to deal with both rural education and the movement's specific needs.

MST participants from different Brazilian states have attended this program. They are selected by the MST national education committee following recommendations that come from the education committee at the state level and which meet some political and ideological criteria. For instance, the attendees of this program have to be "politically committed people," that is, people who are very active in their communities. They must be involved with educational tasks in the encampments or settlements and must return what they learn in the program to the community. Besides holding a secondary school diploma, they should have already demonstrated some "aptitude" for academic matters. Finally, they have to be people who hold an "advanced critical consciousness."

The MST's "pre-service" teacher-training program at the college level (*Pedagogia da Terra*) has been developed through a partnership between the movement and certain public and private Brazilian universities[20] Although it is not an easy task to find teacher educators from the university who are willing to teach in this program, the MST counts on those who have some political and ideological affinity with the movement. Moreover, some of the teacher educators who teach in the program come from the MST.

MST's in-service teacher education activities

As part of its teacher education program, the MST also develops a set of activities for certified teachers who have been teaching at schools in the MST's settlements and encampments.

These teachers regularly receive pedagogical materials, which are produced with great care, involving input from educators, professionals with expertise in specific areas, and MST leaders. The language is very accessible to teachers and members of the community. The teachers, who must discuss these materials in the local education committees, generally report that the materials are very helpful for developing a better understanding of the MST's educational and political purposes.

Teachers' participation in local education committees is one of the most effective activities in terms of their in-service education. Once a week, they study the MST educational materials, discuss the school curriculum, and plan lessons together.

Students and members of the community also participate in these committees. As one of my interviewees remarks, “We have worked really hard on the organization of these committees... as well as the necessity of teachers continuing to study and the importance of the pedagogical committees...”

However, it is not enough to simply set up these committees at the local level and to send the MST's materials to the schools. The teachers request and receive support in terms of discussing and analyzing these materials. Thus, teachers' pedagogical support is also integrated with the MST's in-service teacher education program. This is one of the activities developed by the MST education committee at regional or state level (Beltrame, 2000).

One of the strategies to provide pedagogical support to the teachers comes through the o*ficinas de trabalho* (training workshops). These workshops have become privileged spaces for the teachers who teach at different schools to discuss and share their practices and experiences. Practical activities are emphasized in these workshops. Celebration of the *mística* is another pedagogical activity developed during the workshops.

According to Beltrame (2000), while the activities developed during these workshops attempt to value the group's knowledge and culture, they also offer elements to help teachers rework and improve their teaching practices[21].

Another activity in the MST's in-service teacher education program is participation in meetings at regional and state levels for teachers who work at schools in the MST settlements and encampments. These meetings usually take place monthly during a whole weekend. MST members from the regional or state education committee help set up and coordinate these meetings. Discussions about the teachers' pedagogical practices in the settlement schools are emphasized in these meetings. Participants discuss issues such as life in the Brazilian countryside, the teaching profession, and political participation in the MST.

However, during these meetings educators not only discuss their practices and other pedagogical issues and attend workshops in order to learn different activities to be

developed in their classrooms, but they also intentionally do "ordinary things." As one of my interviewees says,

> We organize these meetings as we do any other MST educational event. The teachers have to do the dishes, clean up the restrooms, the courtyard... We organize the meeting splitting people in groups ("núcleos" ou "brigades") and splitting up the tasks among them... This is very important for their coexistence. It is from these groups that they are going to learn to listen to each other, respect each other's opinion, to work as a team... So, more than talk about the MST pedagogy, what we do during these meetings is to give them the opportunity to live the MST pedagogy... For us, it is crucial not only "knowing how to do" but also and mainly "knowing how to be."

They also celebrate the *mística*, plan the political actions that are scheduled for that month, discuss how to organize events in their local communities, and choose representatives to attend other MST meetings at the state and national levels.

The main purposes of the MST's events on education at national and state levels are to provide spaces for sharing experience, to allow educators to develop the critical distance with which to view their own school reality and, at the same time, to motivate teachers in transforming their practices. According to Beltrame (2000), these events count on expressive attendance of teachers and constitute important spaces to reflect upon and redefine their educational practice.

Other MST's teacher education strategies

Teachers' political participation in different social spaces in their local community is also another very important strategy of the MST's teacher education program. The movement considers teachers' involvement in political demonstrations, protests, marches, land occupations and public building occupations crucial.

Attending and participating in MST political events is integrated into its teacher education program. These events are quite important because they are able to reinforce a sense of belonging to the movement among the teachers and educators (Beltrame, 2000).

In considering other teacher education strategies, my interviewees also mentioned the *Sem Terrinha* meetings, which comprise meetings for pupils between eight and

fourteen years old in the MST encampments and settlements and the MST Youth meeting which is for adolescents from the movement between fifteen and seventeen years old. During these meetings, the children study and discuss humanist and socialist values, their constitutional rights as children and adolescents, and problems that they have in their communities. After three or four days discussing these issues, the children and adolescents bring this discussion to their communities and schools.

According to my interviewees, the pupils who attend these meetings are more assertive and challenge their teachers and principals, demanding a space at the schools to discuss the meeting issues. They believe that this kind of behavior also has an impact and influence on the teachers' education.

Finally, there have been many problems and challenges in establishing the MST's teacher education program, as well as in putting the MST's educational principles into practice at schools in the settlements and encampments. I briefly discuss this topic in the next section.

Problems and challenges

The MST has a political commitment to struggle for the establishment of public schools in its settlements. Most of the schools in the MST's settlements are municipal schools. The movement believes in and agrees that public education should be a task that is performed by the state and one that should remain a state task. Thus, the MST does not want to replace the state in accomplishing this social responsibility.

The fact that the municipal or state government has financial or administrative responsibility for the schools represents a problem and a contradiction for the movement: the MST has no fiscal or administrative control over these schools. For instance, the teachers who teach at schools in its settlements have to be hired following the same rules as any public school. Consequently, most of the teachers who teach in the MST's settlements are non-activist teachers who have been assigned by the official system to teach in these schools. According to Beltrame (2000), most of them "assume these positions against their will and, in some cases, hold a prejudiced view of the MST's educative work" (p. 46).

Many of these "outsider" teachers are unable to grasp the specific issues confronting rural education or to understand education as part of the MST project for social transformation. It has not been an easy task to make the schools and the teachers follow the movement's educational principles. As one of my interviewees puts it,

> Our first challenge is to win over the teachers or bring them closer to the movement. This is a tough task because the mainstream media, the government, and the local powers help keep them far from the movement. So, our challenge is to bring these people closer to the movement in order to make them realize how the movement conceives of education...

This same problem is a rarity among educators who teach at the *Escola Itinerante* (Itinerant School)[22] in the MST's encampments, or who teach literacy for adults both in camps and settlements, or for those who work with early childhood education. These educators are able to understand the specificity of the MST schools because most of them are from the movement and live in the same communities as their students do, and because the movement has invested in their political and professional training.

Another challenge for the movement is the turnover of non-activist teachers at schools in the MST settlements. There is a high dropout rate among the teacher cohort in the settlement schools. Due to bad working conditions[23] and difficulties in access to the settlements, many schoolteachers teach at these schools only because they are obligated to do so. They leave these schools as soon as their probationary period ends. Moreover, because of their low salaries, the teachers have to teach at two or even three schools on the same day. One of the interviewees in my research also mentions this problem in the MST settlement schools:

> The teachers don't like to work at rural schools. They teach at rural schools only until the end of their probationary period. After that, they ask to be transferred to schools located in the town. As a consequence, every year we have new teachers teaching at our schools and we have to re-start the whole educational process again and again... So, it is terrible because it is hard to concretize or move forward with this work.

Indeed, as Cleonice observes, in terms of the movement's teacher education strategies, this is a serious problem because the movement "invests" in the education of teachers who end up staying at the school only for a short time.

Another problem for the movement is the still-existing gap between MST pedagogy and its practical implementation in the classrooms. The relationship between the MST and the school has been a conflictive one. There remains a power conflict between the "legitimate" knowledge transmitted by the school and the knowledge constructed through social struggles and practices, which is considered either marginal to worthless or dangerously "subversive and opposing the established order" (Ribeiro, 2001; Harnecker, 2002).

Moreover, there is an antagonism between cooperative work, which as previously mentioned is a central MST educational principle, entailing values of cooperation, solidarity and autonomy, and those the school usually transmits to the children - values of competition, individualism, dependence - which are characteristic of capitalism and which are daily incorporated into people's lives in various venues including their schooling (Ribeiro, 2001).

Thus, to break with people's individualism and start working toward a notion of cooperativism is also a very difficult task even in the MST's settlements. As one of my interviewees says:

> When people come to the movement, they are interested first in their own plot of land, in their houses, in their own business... So, it takes time to work toward a cooperative mentality. The agrovila is a very important educational space in order to achieve this goal. As I said before, to conquer the land is easy. The whole educational process is much harder and takes years or even generations to change...

Another challenge is to ameliorate the school-community relationship. The MST strongly believes that school has to be conceived as part of the whole community. As the research developed by Ribeiro (2001) shows, although settled farmers recognize the importance of school for their children, "they criticize the traditional teaching that does not include in its activities either the culture or the values linked to agricultural work" (p. 33). Another critique from the community studied by Ribeiro is the mismatch between the agricultural and school calendars. The latter is guided by an urban reality and, as a result, many farmers' children have to miss classes during harvest time. Members of the movement communities also complain about the discrimination their children suffer in the school.

In some states, the organization of local education committees is another challenge to the movement. For instance, in the southern state of Santa Catarina, where Beltrame (2000) did her research,

> the movement has not developed any routinized contacts in the schools, such as visits or support for teachers. The contacts [between the movement and the teachers] take place in the training workshops, in the monthly meetings or in the big political events (p. 65).

In fact, the movement faces challenges specific to each Brazilian state. As one of my interviewees points out that in the Northeast region, for instance, the main challenge is to overcome the inherited cultural background of subordination among poor people:

> In this part of the Brazilian Northeastern region, named Zona da Mata, the patriarchal relationship is still very strong. The patriarchal inheritance is very strong... The coronelism[24] is still very strong. The culture of the sugar cane plantation owners, who are called Senhores de Engenho, is still here. According to this culture, ordinary people cannot get involved with political issues. They have only to obey. The town is considered a kind of extension of the sugar cane plantations - Engenho. (...) In order to give you a better idea about what I am talking about, there is a town close to here where everyone called the mayor's wife "mom." Can you believe that? So, it is really hard to break with this culture of subordination.

Finally, the lack of formal education among landless people in the MST's settlements and encampments, the precarious structure of rural schools and perennial funding shortages also remain major obstacles the movement must overcome.

Tendencies and possibilities

Despite the existence of the various problems the MST confronts in its educational project, it has also won important educational battles, both from a quantitative and qualitative point of view. It has consolidated its efforts to define a proposal for education - in a critical and participative way - that aspires to the development of new women and men. As a result of all of its efforts, MST communities tend to have markedly better schools than other comparable rural communities in Brazil (Harnecker, 2002; Wright & Wolford, 2003).

Caldart (2000) discusses certain educational tendencies and possibilities for terms of education in the MST. One of these tendencies is the movement ability to overcome traditional separations among education, schooling and training. She argues,

...training in the MST is no longer only the political and ideological training of the young and adult landless activists; education is no longer only schooling of the camped and settled children; training can also take place in the school; education does not take place only in the school; training and education are historical tasks, in a long term, that have in common not only the preparation of people for immediate action but also an horizon of generations (p. 179).

At the same time that the school has no pedagogical power to guarantee the development of the "keepers of the struggle" and the school is not the sole place for the development of the *Sem Terra* subject, as Caldart argues, "in its relationship with a social movement such as the MST, the school represents much more than an educational institution centered upon itself" (2000, p. 180).

The movement has been working increasingly with the idea that "the MST school" is also a rural or country school. Thus, "the MST school" can contribute to "the construction and recovery of the identity of rural schools. In the same way, rural schools can help construct the identity of Brazilian public schools" (p. 182).

The author also refers to a new emphasis in the pedagogical discussion that integrates the MST's educational project. "The initial discussions of the MST's educational project were focused on more traditional schooling matters such as, what to teach and how to teach it, highlighting the classroom" (p. 183). The emphasis today, according to Caldart, has been on the cooperative school, the necessity of cultivating the MST's *mística* (spirit or spirituality), the importance of teachers becoming activists, the importance of planning lessons collectively, and the students' involvement in the political activities of the MST. Caldart writes:

> As reflections upon the school style begins to combine with a concern on the part of the movement for cultivating the *Sem Terra* identity, and the values and the stance of the "keepers of the struggle," the emphasis moves from the school toward the subjects of the pedagogical process (p. 184).

These new subjects, among them the *Sem Terra* teachers and the *Sem Terrinha,* each with their own specific identity marks - gender, age cycles, type of actions and activities that they get involved, styles of participating in the movement - participate in the construction of the *Sem Terra* identity as a whole.

Implications for a socially transformative teacher education

In this part of the paper I briefly discuss some implications of the major aspects of the MST experience on the teacher education field and, more specifically, what I call "teacher education for social transformation." While the term "teacher education for social justice" has been increasingly adopted by the specialized literature in the United States, instead, I prefer to use the term "teacher education for social transformation." Thus, before focusing on the implications themselves, I would like to briefly explain the reasons for this semantic and political choice.

Zeichner (2004), drawing on literature from the U.S. during the last 75 years, states that social justice teacher education has now become a slogan that has been used to describe the orientation of many teacher education programs throughout the world. The author argues that, as was the case with "reflection" in the 1980s, we have come to a point where it is difficult to discern, beyond the "social justice" refrain, what actually goes on in a teacher education program. Although the conceptions and practices that fall under the umbrella of social justice oriented teacher education vary greatly, he states that there has been little discussion of this variation in the literature.

Zeichner suggests that it is necessary to unpack the slogan of social justice in teacher education. He examines a variety of ways that it has been conceptualized and implemented, discusses some contradictions between rhetoric and practice, and provides an assessment of what has been achieved through these efforts.

"Social justice" is a term that has been used by progressive people, social movements and organizations for a long time and has recently been co-opted and rhetorically adopted by conservative individuals and institutions. For example, "neoliberals" have rhetorically expressed a commitment to "social justice." However, for its neoliberal advocates, "social justice" means "the equality of opportunity" for "citizens" (conceived largely as "consumers") to compete in the global marketplace. The fact

that "opportunity," freedom and choice in other spheres of most citizen-consumers' lives are increasingly diminished, subject to the demands of corporate needs, is not part of the neoliberal sales pitch.

For me, being committed to "social justice" is a political position, which unlike the neoliberal view, explicitly opposes the status quo and attempts to promote deep changes in terms of power relations at the personal, local, national and international levels. Opposing the status quo means to be simultaneously anti-capitalist (against class exploitation) and anti-imperialist (against old and new forms of economic, symbolic, and cultural colonization), anti-patriarchal (against gender inequality), anti-racist (against race oppression and "White supremacy"), anti-homophobic (against sexual orientation discrimination) and, anti-ableistic (against the social exclusion of people with disabilities).

Even attempting to be as clear and explicit as I can about the meaning of "social justice," I prefer to use the term "social transformation." Although, it may seem that I am constructing a false dichotomy, in my view, the emphasis on "social transformation" differs conceptually and politically from the emphasis of several educational programs, including teacher education programs, concerning the issue of "social justice" and/or "social inclusion;" the latter has been more frequently used in Brazilian educational programs. I believe that an educational program and, more specifically, a teacher education program that is committed to promoting profound social transformation is also necessarily committed to "social justice" and "social inclusion." However, I believe that using the term "social transformation," instead of the "social justice" or "social inclusion," may avoid intentional co-optation by the right in the case of the former and, in the case of the latter, it reminds us that "social inclusion" may be seen as an end in itself, leaving unquestioned the actual sources of inequalities.

The assumption here is that a capitalist society (which is also patriarchal, racist, homophobic, and ableistic) is predicated on exclusion. In this sense, the conquest of little packages of "social inclusion" or "social justice," or things wrapped and presented as such, should not be prematurely and naively celebrated. This is because such "inclusion" or "justice" is co-optive. Besides being bestowed by those who rule (the oppressors) as a way to minimize certain social tensions and, consequently, to

maintain their privileges, such "justice" usually takes place in a marginal and temporary way. In other words, subjects who are socially, racially, culturally, and economically excluded and segregated (the oppressed) must be the principal agents of social transformation. They must be able to conquer, through social collective struggles, their own freedom. As Freire (2000) states, freedom "is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly" (p. 29).

Allow me to focus now upon some implications of the MST experience for what I call "teacher education for social transformation." This experience has shown that the MST teacher education program is likely more effective, if it is combined with the attendees' involvement with the movement as a whole. In turn, the impact of progressive social and cultural movements and organizations on teacher education programs for social transformation can be tremendous.

However, the existence of teacher education programs that are directly ruled by progressive social and cultural movements and organizations is rare[25] Therefore, one needs to ask: how can we transform a teacher education program, which is held by universities and higher education institutions, usually conservative but contradictory institutions, into a teacher education program for social transformation? There is no simple answer to this question and it is not my intention to provide a recipe for "how to develop a teacher education program for social transformation."

On one hand, if a teacher education program has a true commitment to social transformation, those who participate in this program - student teachers, staff, and teacher educators - should be able to find solutions for their specific problems and design a curriculum for that purpose. In addition, I would say that possibilities depend on the level of autonomy that each program has - which in turn depends on continuous struggle - in order to transform them into teacher education programs for social transformation.

On the other hand, I believe that we can learn important lessons from the MST experience concerning the development of teacher education programs for social transformation. In my view, one of the main challenges in developing teacher education programs for social transformation is the challenge of building links to progressive social and cultural movements and organizations which are involved with

actual transformations of society[26]. In addition, there are at least four other aspects of these programs to which we should pay close attention.

First of all, it is impossible to think about the idea of developing a teacher education program for social transformation if we do not have a cohort of teacher educators who truly believe that "*another world is possible*." Thus, it is crucial that the teacher educators involved with this program share similar dreams and a political commitment to social transformation. Instead of a preoccupation with their individual careers, these teacher educators should demonstrate, through their *praxis,* a commitment to the program and its students and to their development as activist educators.

In addition, because there is no recipe or magic formula for developing a teacher education program for social transformation and designing its curriculum, the teacher educators involved in this program should be able to create spaces for reflecting collectively upon and making collective decisions about the program as well as for sharing and discussing their practices as teacher educators and the challenges of developing new activist educators.

The second aspect is the selection of the participants. Traditional teacher education programs usually draw only upon academic standards in order to define those who will attend these programs. Teacher education programs for social transformation should also take into consideration the experiences that the candidates bring to the programs and their ability to reflect upon these experiences - even if this reflection is still embryonic. Because, as Freire (2000) argues, reflection "cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action," (p. 47) these programs should privilege candidates who have been involved with collective social struggles, and, more specifically, with progressive social and cultural movements and organizations.

Ideally, the new student teachers should arrive to the program with at least a sense that there is something fundamentally wrong with society in terms of justice and equality. Therefore, the program should privilege candidates who come from disenfranchised backgrounds (those who come from working class families independent of their gender, race and sexual orientation; women; people of color; homosexuals; and people with disabilities). The assumption here is this: while it is

easier for the disenfranchised to understand the basic principle that "there is something fundamentally unjust about society," privileging the attendance of college by people from disenfranchised backgrounds is already helping to promote change in society. Candidates who come from privileged backgrounds can, of course, also be accepted to teacher education programs for social transformation but they should be able to show that they have already begun Freire's process of "*dying in order to be reborn*" - again even if this process is still very embryonic. In this case, autobiographies and interviews would be crucial instruments for this selection process[27].

A third important aspect is the active participation of the student teachers in making decisions about the curriculum during their trajectories in their teacher education programs for social transformation. Although the MST "pre-service" teacher-training programs are similar to traditional ones, at least in terms of their formal structure, the attendees are quite active and very willing to participate in the construction of the curriculum. According to their accounts, my interviewees wanted to negotiate every single step in their programs and refused to accept a prepackaged education from their teacher educators or from the university. It would be essential that the program itself not only allow but encourage this type of participation in designing the curriculum. In this sense, the previous aspect (the selection of program attendees) would help to foment the participation of the student teachers in the program. As in the case of the attendees of MST teacher-training programs, the selected candidates will not likely accept a "pre-packaged education" from the program.

Finally, it is also crucial to pay attention to the practical experiences (practicum and student teaching) that a teacher education program for social transformation provides to its participants. It is important to select schools[28] and other educative placements which have been involved in collective social struggles as well as schoolteachers and other educators who identify themselves as activist educators.

As mentioned above, it is important to emphasize that all these aspects will depend on the level of autonomy of the program: to hire teacher educators, through taking into account political and ideological criteria rather than pseudo-neutral academic criteria by itself; to define the criteria and the instruments for the selection of its students; to allow and encourage student teachers' active participation in making decisions about

the curriculum of the program; and finally, to decide about the most progressive placements for the students to have their practical experiences.

Notes

[1] This paper was presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting in Montréal, Québec (Canada), on April 15th, 2005.

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[3] The MST was officially established on January 20, 1984.

[4] The MST is basically made up of poor people (peasants) from Brazil's rural areas. In Brazil, poverty remains more acute in rural areas than in urban areas. However, since only 21% of Brazilians live in rural areas, the urban share in the composition of poverty is higher. Moreover, poverty varies markedly across regions, with the Northeast and the North reporting higher poverty rates than the Southeast or the South.

[5] This expression is used as the title of Bales' book about new slavery in the global economy. In order to discuss new forms of slave labor in global capitalism, the author does comparative research across five different countries - Thailand, Mauritania, Brazil, Pakistan, and India. In his chapter about Brazil, although Bales does not mention the MST, he cites the *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (the Pastoral Land Commission), the CPT, as an antislavery movement in the country.

[6] Paulo Freire, a well-known Brazilian educator and one of the most important theoretical references for the landless movement, also criticizes capitalism and "its intrinsic perversity, its anti-solidarity nature" (1997, p. 88). Freire states that capitalism is absolutely insensitive to the ethical dimension of human existence. As for alternatives, he says "I have no reason to admit that a truly democratic socialism is an impossible proposition" (1997, p. 49).

[7] This paper draws on the author's Ph.D. dissertation which discusses the identity construction of activist educators through an analysis of life stories (*testimonios*) of

women educators who have participated in the Landless Workers Movement. These *testimonios*, collected through semi-structured interviews, sought to uncover the main elements that account for the development of their identities as activist educators. In addition to the interviews, documents of various kinds - books, booklets, magazines articles, journal articles, dissertations - about education in general and, more specifically, about its teacher education programs that have been published by people working with or in the MST since the late 1980s - have been collected and analyzed.

[8] Paulo Freire defines praxis as "the unity between action and reflection." He argues that "one cannot change consciousness outside of praxis. But it must be emphasized that the praxis by which consciousness is changed is not only action but action *and* reflection. Thus there is a unity between practice and theory in which both are constructed, shaped, and reshaped in constant movement from practice to theory, then back to new practice" (1985, p. 124).

[9] This nickname identifies the children as *Sem Terra* subjects and an effective part of the MST dynamic. *Sem Terrinha* has at least three identity components: their condition as children, as students, and their participation in the movement which, in turn, changes the meanings of their childhood and school experience. As Caldart (2000) states, "For the children, to participate in the MST has represented the possibility to live the childhood in a different way" (p. 195).

[10] Most of the teachers who teach at schools in the MST's settlements and encampments are women of different ages and multiple ethnic origins. At the beginning of the MST's history, the movement reproduced the tradition that *education is something for women and female teachers* Education was not deemed important enough in order to become an issue that the leaders and the landless men should bee interested in (Caldart, 2000, pp. 186-187).

[11] Freire (1998) agrees that "Teacher preparation should never be reduced to a form of training. Rather, teacher preparation should go beyond the technical preparation of teachers and be rooted in the ethical formation of selves and of history" (p. 23).

[12] The most widespread teacher education approaches in Brazil are those related to the model of technical rationality (Schon 1983). According to this model, also known

as the positivist epistemology of practice, there is a hierarchical division between research and practice which is also reflected in the normative curriculum of the professional school. The normal course of events is to first teach the relevant basic and applied science, and second, to apply the findings to real-world problems of practice.

[13] Freire (1996) argues that "all teaching implies research and all research implies teaching. There is no real teaching in which one does not find research, as questioning, inquiry, curiosity, and creativity; just as there is no research in which one does not learn why one knows" (p. 132).

[14] Most of the attendees of these programs are people from the MST's settlements and encampments who have taught in one of the educational *frentes* (fronts) - adult education (literacy), childhood education, elementary education - and/or *professores leigos* (uncertified teachers) who have also taught in settlement schools. Thus, since most of the attendees of these programs are people who have already been teaching and working in other educational activities in their communities, the term "pre-service" is not quite appropriate in this case. I have decided to keep using this term only for facilitating the readers' comprehension.

[15] In Brazil, the school vacations are in the months of January and February (Summer vacation) and July (Winter break).

[16] The word *mística* has two main meanings in the landless movement: "spirit or spirituality" and "dramatization." First, the MST *mística* (spirit or spirituality) is what Caldart (2000) calls "the spice of the struggle" or "a passion that stimulates the activists." According to Caldart, "It is not simple to define *mística* because its definition is not expressed through words but through gestures, symbols, and emotions. The limit to understanding it is rooted in the word itself: *mística* (spirit or spirituality) means 'mystery,' that is, if it is completely revealed it loses the essence of its meaning" (p. 134). *Mística* in the movement stems from the Christian traditions of liberation theology (Wright & Wolford, 2003). Second, *mística* (dramatization) has also become a cultural act where the landless people use different language forms - theater, songs and dances - in order to portray their struggles and their hopes as well as to facilitate discussions of difficult issues such as the FTAA (Free Trade Area of

the Americas). Thus, in order to explain what might be difficult concepts, to present information and to inspire people, MST activists employ what is called *mística* (dramatization).

[17] Agrarian reform educators are all of those people who struggle for land and social justice in the Landless Workers Movement (MST), including schoolteachers (Caldart, 1997).

[18] As an adult education program the Brazilian educational legislation only allows that people who are eighteen years old or older and hold an elementary school diploma are eligible for attending the MST's teacher-training program at high school level (*Magistério*).

[19] The MST established its first "pre-service" teacher-training program at the college level in 1998 through a partnership between the movement and a private university - the University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos (UNISINOS) - in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

[20] The Federal University of Espírito Santo (UFES) and the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT) are two public universities that have participated in this partnership with the MST. In the state of Rio Grande do Sul, a private institution, the University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos (UNISINOS) has also developed a program along with the movement. The federal government has provided funding in order to cover the expenses of these programs.

[21] Most of these activities come out of the experience of some progressive groups associated with the Catholic Church and are also used by other popular groups and progressive social movements in Brazil (Beltrame, 2000).

[22] *Escola Itinerante* (Itinerant School) - "a school that goes wherever the camp goes in its struggle for the land" - is a successful experience that has been developed in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, through which the educators try to bring the school close to the movement's logic.

[23] In general, teachers' working conditions at Brazilian rural schools are not good. There are many difficulties for the teachers who teach in these schools: precarious

school buildings usually far from the students' houses, multiage classrooms, children who have neither notebooks nor pencils, and teachers without formal training who earn a small salary and do not have many opportunities for attending in-service teacher-training programs (Beltrame, 2000).

[24] The term "*coronelismo*," meaning "despotism or tyranny," stems from the agricultural elites in Brazil's Northeast, which were represented by the iconic colonel, a typical figurehead of the agricultural sector.

[25] It is important to clarify that the MST "pre-service" teacher-training programs at the college level are not "directly ruled" by the movement. The MST has to negotiate with the universities in order to bring these programs as close as possible to the aims of the movement. The landless movement has more autonomy to develop its "pre-service" teacher-training program at the high-school level though.

[26] There have been some examples of teacher education programs in the United States such as, the "New College" at Teachers College Columbia University in New York City (see Liston & Zeichner, 1991) and the Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education (see Rodgers, 1998), which have been linked with broader social movements for social transformation.

[27] One of the first tasks of teacher education programs for social transformation should be to promote a critical analysis and a collective reflection upon the attendees' experiences, using their autobiographies, toward building a feeling of indignation against social and economic injustice.

[28] Ideally, teacher education programs for social transformation would favor working with "democratic schools," as those described in the book edited by Apple and Bean (1995), or, through their partnerships with schools, help these schools to help themselves to become more democratic and committed to social transformation.

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