



**From the campaign “*De pé no chão também se aprende a ler*”
to the professional trajectory of teacher Nair Almeida de Oliveira¹**

Da campanha “*De pé no chão também se aprende a ler*”
à trajetória profissional da professora Nair Almeida de Oliveira

De la campaña “*De pé no chão também se aprende a ler*”
a la trayectoria profesional de la maestra Nair Almeida de Oliveira

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Abstract

The research aimed to understand, based on the biography of professor Nair Almeida de Oliveira, her professional training process and her role as a teacher in the campaign “*De pé no chão também se aprende a ler*”, in the city of Natal, in Rio Grande Norte (1961-1964). Based on cultural history theory and oral history methodology intertwined with imagery sources, thematic interviews were used with the teacher (now deceased) and three people who lived with her. Nair Oliveira is an illiterate farmers’ daughter, who studied and became a teacher at the Sister Vitória congregation. She dedicated her life to the education of the poor people and stood out for her leadership in the *Rocas* neighborhood, especially in the young people and adults education during the campaign period. She emphatically worked to eradicate illiteracy and democratize education in a contextualized way, by incorporating popular culture into teaching processes using Paulo Freire’s method.

Keywords: Biography of women; Popular education; Teacher training.

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Resumo

A pesquisa objetivou compreender, a partir da biografia da professora Nair Almeida de Oliveira, o seu processo de formação profissional e sua atuação como professora na campanha “de pé no chão também se aprende a ler”, na cidade de Natal, no Rio Grande do Norte (1961-1964). Amparando-se teoricamente na história cultural e metodologicamente na história oral entrecruzada com fontes imagéticas, utilizaram-se entrevistas temáticas com a biografada (já falecida) e três pessoas que com ela conviveram. Nair Oliveira, filha de agricultores analfabetos, estudou e tornou-se professora na congregação Irmã Vitória. Dedicou sua vida à educação dos pobres e destacou-se por sua liderança no bairro das Rocas, especialmente na educação de jovens e adultos no período da campanha. Atuou enfaticamente na erradicação do analfabetismo e na democratização da educação de maneira contextualizada, por incorporar a cultura popular nos processos de ensino com o método de Paulo Freire.

Palavras-chave: Biografia de mulheres; Educação popular; Formação de professores.

Resumen

La investigación tuvo como objetivo comprender, a partir de la biografía de la docente Nair Almeida de Oliveira, su proceso de formación profesional y su actuación como docente en la campaña “De pé no chão também se aprende a ler”, en la ciudad de Natal, en Rio Grande do Norte (1961-1964). Apoyándose teóricamente en la historia cultural y metodológicamente en la historia oral entrecruzada con fuentes imaginarias, se utilizaron entrevistas temáticas con la biografiada (ya fallecida) y tres personas que vivieron con ella. Nair Oliveira, hija de agricultores analfabetos, estudió y se convirtió en maestra en la congregación Irmã Vitória. Dedicó su vida a la educación de los pobres y se destacó por su liderazgo en el barrio Rocas, especialmente en la educación de jóvenes y adultos durante el período de la campaña. Actuó enfáticamente en la erradicación del analfabetismo y en la democratización de la educación de forma contextualizada, al incorporar la cultura popular en los procesos de enseñanza con el método de Paulo Freire.

Palabras clave Biografía de mujeres; Educación popular; Formación de profesores.

Introduction

This research is located in the field of the history of education, more specifically, it deals with the women's education and the feminine professional role in teaching in the popular literacy movement at the beginning of the 1960s. Based on a biographical study supported by the hermeneutic perspective (DOSSE, 2020), focuses on the teacher's professional performance, with emphasis on her struggle with the aim of overcoming illiteracy in the economically disadvantaged classes, who made a commitment to teach from the ideological perspective of Paulo Freire's dialogism.

From this perspective, the present study brings as a reference the educational trajectory and professional performance of teacher Nair Almeida de Oliveira (hereinafter Nair Oliveira) based on her participation in the Campaign "*De pé no chão também se aprende a ler*", which took place in the city of Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, during the time of mayor Djalma Maranhão and secretary of education Moacyr de Góes, between 1961 and 1964. This historical educational context was marked by clashes in favor of eradicating illiteracy and training, on emergency basis, of the so-called little teachers:

These girls were removed from anonymity and thrown into the light of the Campaign that was galvanizing the city. They started to have a title: little teacher. The parents, most of whom came from humble origins, were proud of their daughters' new situation. Their own residences came to be known, in the neighborhood, as the little teacher's house. (MARANHÃO, 1999, p. 98-99).

In this way, there was a double training: women who had already primary education were given the opportunity to qualify to work as teachers; and illiterate children were given the possibility of learning to read and write in a contextualized way, based on the Paulo Freire's method, which considered the students' reality in the selection of words that would be decoded to acquire writing and understanding of the world.

This study is relevant because it fills in the gaps in the biography of Nair Oliveira, an educator with little visibility who did not occupy a prominent place in official history, while preserving her memory. A woman who emerged from the popular classes and took advantage of the opportunity to train herself with the aim of teaching children, teenagers and adults in the outskirts of Natal, actively working not only in the fight against illiteracy, but also in the process of strengthening democratic institutions, with the defense of a political, social and educational project for the poor in a historical time whose scenario brings to light the context of proximity to the 1964 military coup, whose tragic outcome culminated in the crime of burning the schools in the campaign.

Nair Oliveira lived her entire life in the *Rocas* neighborhood, where she worked as a teacher in the first school camp, a place that stood out as a pioneer in the campaign project. This neighborhood was characterized by the harsh social reality, as it had the greatest rates of poverty and illiteracy in Natal. The *Rocas* community was made up of a population of port workers, small traders, fishermen, dockworkers, washerwomen, farmers from the interior of the capital, some public employees, in addition to the marginality characteristic of peripheral neighborhoods (GÓES, 1999).

The question is, how a poor woman, from a peripheral neighborhood with precarious living conditions, became literate, prepared for teaching and recognized as a reference teacher in her community since her work in the campaign "*De pé no chão também se aprende a ler*"? In order to answer to the aforementioned research problem, a study was developed with the aim

of understanding, based on the biography of professor Nair Oliveira, her professional training process and her role as a teacher in the campaign “*De pé no chão também se aprende a ler*”, in the city of Natal, in Rio Grande do Norte.

Methodology

The research is based on the assumptions of cultural history theory, the most evident historiographical field in Brazil from the last decade of the 20th century, which values cultural manifestations, also revealing popular culture, invisible in previous centuries (BARROS, 2005). This is because it is understood that every subject produces culture when they communicate, especially through the discourses of social life, therefore their readings, practices and representations matter for the history of education (FIALHO; LIMA; QUEIROZ, 2019). In this way, light is shed on Nair Oliveira's cultural practices, carried out in her social exchange relations to become a teacher and soldier for the literacy of the poor, considering both her discursive and non-discursive practices.

The teacher's Nair Oliveira's biography allows us to delve into the life story of a woman from a simple and peripheral background, who saw in teaching the possibility of working for pay close to home. History that intertwines with so many other girls from the popular classes of her time, but which, at the same time, is unique in meanings and representations. A biography that deconstructs the traditional official biographical model with edifying speeches, because, instead of privileging and glorifying heroes, nobles and ecclesiastics, it makes it possible to understand the tensions and confrontations of a common life, in its interrelations with the popular cultural context of *Rocas*. After all, as Bourdieu (1989) teaches, the construction of the object to be investigated and the chosen method must be capable of thinking and reconstructing paths that direct those objectives socially considered instigating, of a socially important and scientific nature.

As recommended by Dosse (2020, p. 8), it is understood that “[...] Biographical identity is no longer considered to be frozen like a statue, but always subject to mutations. It cannot be reduced to simple transcriptions of fingerprints [...]”. In Nair Oliveira's biography, in this sense, this entanglement was considered, which is based on the web of a life story and its individual and collective connections inseparably, analyzed hermeneutically, considering the multiple readings and re-readings – of the teacher, the biographers and the readers –, which will mobilize prior knowledge and unique interpretations (FIALHO; FREIRE, 2018).

“It is understood that research in this field comes at a good time to provide visibility to characters from the History of Education who have been forgotten in time and space [...]” (XAVIER, A.; VASCONCELOS; XAVIER, L., 2018, p. 1024), but which contributed significantly to the educational development of other generations. In this sense, knowing Nair Oliveira's biography allows us to expand knowledge about her history and the socio-historical and educational reality of the early 1960s.

Methodologically, we opted for Oral History, in the biographical genre, as it makes it possible, based on oral narratives used as epicenters in the research, to problematize the history of the biographer's education and her pedagogical practices adopted in teaching (FIALHO; BRAGA JÚNIOR, 2015). In this way, the oral narratives used in the study were collected in the form of free interviews, which refer to the record of personal experience, such as memories and forgetfulness, about the professional trajectory of professor Nair Oliveira, recorded on a digital recorder. As Alberti (2004, p. 19) considers:

Thus, it is no longer a negative fact that the deponent can 'twist' reality, have 'flaws' in their memories or 'make mistakes' in their report; what is important now is to include such occurrences in a broader reflection, asking why the interviewee conceives the past in one way and not another and why and to what extent his perception differs (or not) from those of others deponents. [...].

It is understood that oral history is a method that does not propose a rigid commitment to the truth, but strives for greater approximation and fidelity to data, that is, it accepts that history cannot be reduced to an absolute and unquestionable truth by involving subjectivities. The richness of memories originating from selective memory is considered, which express affective particularities, anxieties and conflicts, as “[...] it is, then, through such narratives that it is possible to rescue a web of meanings intertwined in mnemonics conflicts and diversity” (VASCONCELOS; ARAÚJO, 2016, p. 20).

In accordance with ethical principles, before collecting oral statements, the educators' biography project was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee, which gave a favorable opinion under number 2.585.705/2018. Then, the free and informed consent form was invited and explained to the interviewees, who agreed to have their narratives recorded, transcribed and validated for the purposes of this scientific research and its respective dissemination. In addition to the biographed woman, who was still alive at the time of the interviews, more people were contacted: Dilma Santana Ielpo da Cunha, former student of the camp “*De pé no chão também se aprende a ler*”; Graça Jeane Almeida de Oliveira, Nair Oliveira's daughter; and Antônio Carlos da Silva, son-in-law of the biographer, as explained in Chart 1.

Chart 1 – Oral sources of the research

The Interviewee's name	Interview Date	Interview time	Interviewer	Relationship with the teacher
Nair Almeida de Oliveira	05/08/2015	43m26s	José Gerardo Vasconcelos	The teacher herself
Graça Jeane Almeida de Oliveira	23/04/2022	44m57s	Fernanda Ielpo da Cunha	Daughter
Antônio Carlos da Silva	23/04/2022	22m14s	Fernanda Ielpo da Cunha	Son in law
Dilma Santana Ielpo da Cunha	26/04/2022	34m19s	Fernanda Ielpo da Cunha	Neighborhood resident and former student

Source: Prepared by the authors (2022).

The selection of interviewees was based on the search for the oldest people in the *Rocas* neighborhood. We initially located Mrs. Dilma Cunha, a longtime resident of the neighborhood and student of the aforementioned campaign, who was deeply interested in the history of *Rocas*, immediately willing to collaborate with the research and mediate the first meeting with teacher Nair Oliveira and later with the others research social subjects.

The contact established with the interviewee was made in August 2015, when there was the opportunity to interview her in person in the *Rocas* neighborhood, this record being kept in the researchers' personal files, preserving its originality. After the teacher's death, in the year 2020, moved by her departure, we carried out a second

moment of immersion in *Rocas*, from April to June 2022, with the purpose of searching for new testimonies capable of deepening the studies about the teacher's biography Nair Oliveira at the interface with her performance in the campaign "*De pé no chão também se aprende a ler*". We consider the relevance of giving visibility and preserving the history and memory of Professor Nair Oliveira, we soon understand that "[...] each biographical interview is a complex social interaction, a system of waiting roles, injunctions, norms and implicit values" (FERRAROTTI, 2014, p. 73). The oralities were intertwined with other imagery sources, given during the interviews by the collaborators themselves, namely:

Chart 2 – Imagery Sources

Source	Storage location
Photograph of the beginning of construction of the school and the São José Laboratory, led by Sister Vitória, in Rocas	Escola São José, localizada à rua São João de Deus, n. 3, Rocas, Natal/RN
Photograph of teacher Nair Oliveira when she taught at the camp " <i>De pé no chão também se aprende a ler</i> "	Family collection
Image of teacher Nair Oliveira painted on the wall of the Café Filho state school by the potiguar artist Marcelo	Café Filho State School, located at Décio Fonseca Street, no number, Brasília Teimosa, Rocas, Natal/RN
Photograph of teacher Nair Oliveira painted by artist Wellington Potiguar	Family collection
Photography of the camp construction " <i>De pé no chão também se aprende a ler</i> "	Public image available online
Camp " <i>De pé no chão também se aprende a ler</i> " destroyed by fire	Public image available online

Source: Prepared by the authors (2022).

The images help to better visualize the biographer, understand how she was immortalized in local art and learn about the history of the camp, as we will demonstrate in the section below.

Personal trajectory and professional performance: an experience among peers in the Rocas neighborhood during the campaign "*De pé no chão também se aprende a ler*"

Nair Almeida de Andrade, Antônio Faustino de Almeida's and Júlia Gomes de Almeida's daughter, was born on October 19, 1935, in the city of Ceará-Mirim, which is located in the Leste Potiguar mesoregion and in the Macaíba microregion, bordering the municipalities of Maxaranguape, São Gonçalo do Amarante, Ielmo Marinho, Taipu and the Atlantic Ocean, covering an area of 726 km². At the time, the city had approximately 25 thousand inhabitants and its economy came from artisanal fishing, family farming and small businesses (IBGE, 2021).

Her family is mostly made up of poor farmers from the Northeast hinterland, marked by drought, working under the hot sun, food restrictions and countless other difficulties and social vulnerabilities. Mrs. Júlia Almeida had nine children and only four survived, Nair Oliveira being the oldest; the others are Dalva Maria Gomes de Almeida de Oliveira, José Gomes de Almeida and Tereza Gomes de Almeida.

In search of better living conditions and study prospects for their children, the family migrated from Ceará-Mirim to the capital Natal in 1941, at the time the teacher was 6 years old. Initially they went to live in the *Quintas* neighborhood, then, in 1949, they settled in the *Rocas* neighborhood, remaining there until her death, in 2020.

And it was in the search for the education of her children that Mrs. Júlia Almeida obtained the first opportunity to access formal education for Nair Oliveira through Sister Vitória, a missionary nun from the *Rocas* neighborhood, whose mission was to teach the surrounding girls to read and write, giving them opportunity to educate not only to work in the domestic sphere as gifted housewives and mothers, but also to learn a trade to help with the family income, offering a profession. Thus, she was taught by Sister Vitória, then studied as a boarding student at the *Ambulatório São José*, from the same congregation, and later, at the age of 14, she was hired as a teacher at that same school. Teaching the children of the neighborhood, for the teacher, was a way of repaying the opportunity given by the nuns, carrying out a professional activity that she considered noble and also helping with her family's expenses.

Figure 1 - Beginning of construction of the São José School and Laboratory, led by Sister Vitória, in Rocas



Source: Collection of the São José das Rocas School.

In Image 1, from the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, it is possible to identify Sister Vitória dressed in a dark habit and a white horn on her head, coordinating the construction of the *Rocas* school camp, surrounded by children, especially girls from the *Rocas* neighborhood, who were literate by the nuns of the congregation.

The Vitória Sisters represent a project of the Catholic Church, the Sisters of the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Love, whose responsibility would be to continue the legacy of Mother Francisca Lechn², a missionary who dedicated herself to educating women and training mainly domestic workers. This project was based on Marian education, designed according to the precepts of the Catholic Church, valuing the doctrine, modest conduct and obedient behavior of women to become good mothers and wives. In effect, as *Rocas'* audience was made up of poor girls, many needed to work to support themselves and help their families, so that poor and socially excluded girls ended up working as maids (OLIVEIRA, 1999).

² Born in 1833, in southern Bavaria, Germany. She studied with the School Sisters, graduating as a teacher. She went to Vienna, where she dedicated herself to young women coming from the countryside looking for jobs in the capital. She founded the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Love in 1868 (Daughters of Divine Love, <https://filhasdoamordivino.com/>).

The Daughters of Divine Love is women association dedicated to the women's education, preferably the care and training of domestic workers. Dedicating themselves mainly to the assistance and education of women, the members of the Society want to serve as an instrument of Divine Love, cooperating so that women are led to their destiny. (OLIVEIRA, 1999, p. 105).

Along the lines of the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Love, the Vitória Sisters also worked in the education of poor and disadvantaged girls, preparing them for work in the homes of wealthy families, where they worked as maids. Nair Oliveira, unlike most of the girls in the brotherhood, worked as a teacher and even got married late, in 1966, at the age of 31, with Paulo Fernandes de Oliveira, having four daughters: Maria das Graças Almeida de Oliveira, Claudia Graciete Oliveira Braun, Jane Cleide Almeida de Oliveira and Graça Jeane Almeida de Oliveira.

Her marriage was very troubled, marked by domestic violence and her husband's alcoholism, which made her opt for separation as a means of protecting herself and her daughters, as explained in the words of her youngest daughter, Graça Jeane Almeida de Oliveira (oral report, interview given on 04/23/2022): "The memory I have is that she was a very warlike person. She raised four daughters alone, because she separated very early, due to situations of domestic violence [...]". The report reflects that, by breaking and resisting the cycle of gender violence, professor Nair Oliveira changes the patriarchal social order and the domination-exploitation project: "[...] women can offer resistance to the process of exploitation-domination that falls upon them and millions of them have acted in this way [...]" (SAFFIOTI, 2001, p. 120).

It is worth noting that, upon separating from her attacker, teacher Nair Oliveira did not worry about making the divorce official, presenting herself as an empowered woman who autonomously assumes the raising of her daughters and household expenses. It is important to highlight that female empowerment permeates factors such as social class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion and even nationality (LAZZARI; ARAÚJO, 2018). This makes us reflect that this empowerment was only possible because, even immersed in a sexist society, strongly marked by Christian education, teacher Nair Oliveira had education, profession and support from people in the community, these elements being of great value for those seeking a break with cycles of domestic violence.

It should also be noted that the teacher's dedication and commitment to education gained legitimacy even before the "*De pé no chão*" campaign, taking her first steps teaching children in her home, maintaining an improvised school that would later receive support from the city hall. Teacher Nair Oliveira recalled (oral report, interview given on 05/08/2015): "In each house there was a small school, because you had a lot of children to study, and the schools were few, and he was worried about this and held a meeting with people in the neighborhood. Then, if you had a large room, it was already given over to create a school."

Figure 2 – Teacher Nair when she started teaching in the camps

Source: Personal family archive (2022).

The image 2 depicts teacher Nair Oliveira when she began teaching at the small school in her home, between 1956 and 1959. It is interesting to highlight that this model of small schools already existed throughout Brazil, being known as isolated or unitary schools, but it was during the Djalma Maranhão's administration the movement to transform such spaces into the locus of execution of the project to eradicate illiteracy inspired by Paulo Freire began. Further confirming the words of Graça Jeane Oliveira (oral report, interview given on 04/23/2022), "[...] when this campaign process began, it did not start with the camp, it started with the streets, which was called *"De casa em casa se aprende a ler."*

In Natal, isolated schools arrived in the 1950s and spread intensely with the support of the Djalma Maranhão government (1956-1959), expanding even further in the second term (1961-1964), following the campaign *"De pé no chão também se aprende a ler"* This recalls the number of 86 small schools at the beginning of the government, which at the end of the second administration, reached the mark of approximately 1,878 (PRANTO, 2018).

The teacher recalls that the structures of the first schools were not adequate: "I had around twenty-five to thirty students. I would put a bench here, a bench against here, and here, and whoever couldn't do it would put a stool here, there" (NAIR OLIVEIRA, 2018 *apud* PRANTO, 2018, p. 101). In effect, the classrooms operated with a large number of students and with limited school material, requiring teachers, most of the time, to use the improvisation and undeniable support that the local population offered. Furthermore, at that time, teachers were not trained, many only had secondary or primary education, they did not master the teaching and learning process, making this also a problem that was reflected in the quality of teaching students. The words of teacher Nair Oliveira (oral report, interview given on 05/08/2015) substantiate the above: "[...] the little teacher who at that time almost none of them had trained. They had a gymnasium; Sometimes, they only had primary school, right?"

This explicit reality shows two aspects closely interconnected in this first moment of the schools. On the one hand, the very precariousness of the schools' implementation, whose real scenario highlighted the improvisation that permeated the classes, added to the teachers' lack of qualifications, who as they were lay people, represented cheap labor. On the other hand, it also enabled the inclusion of these teachers from the popular classes in

the educational scenario, called to have a profession, receive a salary and especially to be recognized and respected as teachers among their peers in the community. Educators who, upon learning about the social reality and problems of their community, exercised a more contextualized practice (PRANTO, 2018).

Corroborating the testimony of teacher Nair Oliveira (oral report, interview given on 08/05/2015), we highlight: “It was a job that we could get at that time, right. We had a salary [...]”. In other words, amid the absence of a job field for women, being a teacher was, at times, the only assured possibility of obtaining a paid job, making education a hallmark of their career not only to ensure the guarantee of survival, as well as social ascension, in a scenario hitherto marked by pauperism, but also by changes in the economic, social and educational structures of the world and Brazil.

The political-social scenario of the 1950s and the first years of the 1960s were characterized by the Post-War moment in the world, which resulted in the opening of borders for the globalization of markets (GÓES, 1999). The capitalism problems, with social inequalities, industrializations that exploited workers' labor, among other issues, began to worry part of society, which organized itself into unions and discussed ways to fight for better employability and living conditions. (CORTEZ, 2005).

It is important to highlight that the residents of the outskirts of Natal, such as *Rocas*, felt the reflection of this scenario and saw in education a possibility of becoming literate as adults, based on the reality of the social context in which they lived, seeking qualification and unity articulated by the struggle for better working and living conditions. In this way, the school camps construction, which took place between 1961 and 1964, supported by the campaign, was reasonably accepted by the popular classes.

The initial phase of the campaign was marked by a broad movement of community mobilization, without money to build formal educational establishments, it was the residents of *Rocas* and the neighborhood Nationalist Committee who organized themselves in favor of this endeavor.

Figure 3 – Construction of the first camp in the *Rocas* neighborhood



Source: Google Images.

The school camps in the region were covered with coconut straw and beaten clay floors, built by carpenters from the city hall with the support of *canguleiro* fishermen from *Canto do*

Mangue, who knew the geology of the beach areas and the dunes, a true work of popular culture. “The construction is authentic to the work of popular culture used by fishermen on the northeastern beaches, a direct heir to indigenous housing” (GÓES, 1999, p. 101). Thus, the popular education project came to fruition, as Góes (1999, p. 102) explains:

The first ‘Camp’ marked the beginning of the pilot work carried out in the Rocas neighborhood: four warehouses, with four classes each and a large circular warehouse for recreation, parent-teacher circle meetings and festive sessions. Operating in three shifts: morning, afternoon and night. In 1961, two more ‘Camps’ were built: Rocas and Carrasco. In 1962, the number increased to nine: Rocas Carrasco, Quintas, Conceição, Granja, Nova Descoberta, Nordeste, Aparecida and Igapó. Thus, the main limits of the city were covered. At this time, the ‘Schools’, as we reported when we discussed the ‘First Phase’ of the Campaign, had already grown to three hundred.

The beginning of the school camps is also revealed by the active presence of the *Movimento Popular de Alfabetização* (MPA) and the *Centro de Cultura Popular* (CCP) of the *União Nacional dos Estudantes* (UNE), which made commitments to the campaign, in addition to the Paulo Freire’s ideas and methodologies, focused on democracy and the teacher’s dialogic way with the local reality (CORTEZ, 2005).

Freire’s idea (1996) proposes an education committed to democratic principles, which should focus on the emancipation and freedom of man, his students, critical and political consciousness. For him, the educational process was not something merely verbalized and disconnected from the social context, such as traditional “banking” education in schools, which transmitted knowledge without students participating in the process. And it was with this conception of education that Freire’s ideas began to be inserted into the campaign’s methodological proposals, incorporating discussions of social justice, inequality, dialogue, class struggle, structural change and the critical teacher. This proposal, which was established throughout the campaign, was propagated in the lectures and courses held by Freire at the Natal Education Department, in which the pedagogical team was always present and committed to multiplying their knowledge in the training processes of the so-called “little teachers”. (lay teachers).

It should be noted that the emergency courses were intended to meet the enormous demand for teachers to serve the population of peripheral neighborhoods, however at that time there were not enough teachers with teaching training, the city council began to invest in girls from the neighborhood who had primary or secondary education, initially seeking to offer a minimum level of training to work in the classroom. “[...] Such teachers received prior training and weekly monitoring, which throughout the Campaign was systematized through the activities of the Teacher Training Center” (PRANTO, 2018, p. 107).

The course graduated a thousand lay teachers, who after being trained, were assigned to one of the camps’ small schools and generally in places closest to their homes, which avoided spending money on transport and ensured the possibility of contextualized teaching. Furthermore, they could appear in simple clothing, approximating the reality of children who attended schools, who could also study even with their feet on the floor, that is, without the need for shoes, as referred to in the campaign slogan. (GÓES, 2009).

The little teachers training was accompanied by planning and monitoring meetings with the Teacher Training Center (CFP) team, with the camp supervisors, who discussed the problems faced by them during the week, carrying out studies, redesigning work and

adapting to demands to be solved (SALES; NARCIZO, 2013), as recalled by Nair Oliveira (oral report, interview given on 05/08/2015):

we had an educational counselor and we met on Saturdays to plan the week classes [...]. She taught Portuguese, Mathematics, Geography, etc. Most of the students were not literate, so we started with letters, with syllables, forming words.

We observed that the report explained above by teacher Nair Oliveira is consistent with what was found in the research by Sales and Narcizo (2013, p. 9093) about the campaign: “We had weekly visits to the camps [...]. Everything was discussed with the teachers, with the camp directors [...]. This visit wasn't just to look, no! These were follow-up meetings that we held, discussion, suggestions”. In this way, it was noticeable that there was not only the teachers training to take up teaching, but also a rigorous monitoring of the training process, which followed the ideas of Paulo Freire, whose meetings took place with the aim of carrying out a survey of the demands and problems presented, as well as their possible solutions.

The teacher was encouraged to think about his practices, paving the way for reflective practice, while at the same time encouraging the development of continued training (SALES; NARCIZO, 2013). In this context, teacher Nair Oliveira, in addition to working with reading the world, also valued playful teaching in a creative way, she developed learning in students based on the difficulties of each student, using strategically and methodologically, play to strengthen bonds of affection and learning, so that their students could enjoy school. As Antônio Carlos da Silva (oral report, interview given on 04/23/2022), her son-in-law, recalled: “She said that one of the difficulties was keeping the child there, bringing the child to education, because many were in need at home, they went there precisely to eat, play and run [...]”. Added to these memories are those of Dilma Santina (oral report, interview given on 04/26/2022), resident of the neighborhood and student during the camp:

We played in circles, in the gym, we jumped, played yellow, she taught us the numbers: 1, 2, 3, 5 [...] teaching us how to count; She teaches us through games. It was like a wheel; we kept jumping from one place to another, then she asked: ‘What number is this here?’ [...].

The teacher Nair Oliveira's work during the campaign had several moments, covering the education of children, support in the training of other volunteer literacy teachers and the literacy of adults in the *Rocas* neighborhood. Mrs. Nair Oliveira's intervention was marked by the strong influence she had in the neighborhood, winning over the adult population to become literate. About this, Graça Jeane Oliveira (oral report, interview given on 04/24/2022) said:

This idea of training, educating and making the population literate... there was even a competition held on the streets to find out who was most literate; there were some banners that they put up for competition: which street could teach so many students to read and write in less time in 40 hours, 20 hours, for the benefit of education. It was an idea that remained until the 1964 coup, when the mayor was deposed.

The teacher's commitment to the neighborhood's students was a flag present in the teacher's daily life and the recognition of those who were her students, which also makes Nair

Oliveira's work significant in the process of teaching reading, writing and counting, with the results of her work fruits that will germinate among her peers in *Rocas*. Some of her students managed to break the condition of poverty and lack of opportunity by becoming literate, giving a new meaning to their lives through knowledge, mainly by obtaining a profession with dignity through studies and/or graduating at a higher level, as stated by Mrs. Dilma Santana (oral report, interview given on 04/26/2022):

Today here in Rocas we have a lot of people who graduated because of her [...]. She was a great teacher. She taught out of love, she had a lot of patience [...]. A doctor, an engineer, an artist came out of Rocas, everyone knows that she helped. If they are doctors, it's because she had a helping hand.

Or even exerting influence on her daughter's professional choices, as revealed by Graça Jeane (oral report, interview given on 04/24/2022):

she was an influence on me. Nowadays, I'm a teacher with all the mishaps that teachers go through, especially in primary education, because of her. I had a lot of admiration for the work she did. She was always literate; she taught all the kids here; she even taught her great-grandson to read and write. She was teaching him starting with notebooks, with paintings, with literacy activities, but, in fact, she taught all the girls at home, aged 4 to 5, to read and write. It started with this literacy process; we started learning to read with her.

It is worth mentioning that Nair Oliveira taught literacy based on popular culture elements, valuing them in such a way that she became the first librarian in the neighborhood, given her passion for reading and culture. She participated in the actions proposed in the courses promoted in popular culture circles aimed at teachers and students, which had Freire's ideas of adult literacy as a reference, awakening political and social awareness based on their realities, at the same time as proposing the construction of the cultural identity of these subjects, giving them opportunities to insert themselves in cultural spaces and preserving their the productions, as mentioned by Graça Jeane Oliveira (oral report, interview given on 04/24/2022):

She had a passion for education that was never about financial enrichment, but about cultural richness. She talked a lot not only about the content issue, but also about the emancipation issue, the community, people learning to have independence, the cultural issue [...].

Inspired by Paulo Freire, Nair Oliveira encouraged the *Rocas* children to get involved with art, music, sport, poetry, reading, in joint activities so that they could learn to play an instrument, be part of the choir, participate in parties and events, getting involved with the activities of the acoustic shell³. Such insertions, so significant for teacher Nair Oliveira, make her understand culture as being a process that facilitates the man's emancipation, a democratic process, or, as Góes (2009, p. 142) explains, "[...] this culture must lead man to assume the role of subject of his own cultural creation,

³ According to Góes (2009), the acoustic shell was considered the lung through which Natal's intelligence breathed. More precisely, it would be the stage where open-air performances took place, the setting for large gatherings, the place for debates about varied and exciting themes. The acoustic shell constituted, with the art gallery and a library, the main cultural square in Natal.

making him not only a receiver, but mainly a creator of cultural expressions”. Sales and Narcizo (2013, p. 9094) publish statements that collaborate what is found in Nair Oliveira’s biography:

The camp was a center of culture. Everything about the community happened there, the festivities, the revival of traditional festivals, pastorals, *fandangos*. All of this was introduced into the curriculum and parties took place at the camp; [...] It was an education process concerned with a human, democratic pedagogical dimension, which sought to encompass all dimensions of the educational process – culture, theater, music, literature.

Since art is such a significant means of expression for teacher Nair Oliveira, her legacy brought inspiration to artists from Rio Grande do Norte, who painted her image where it all began, in the *Rocas* neighborhood, at the camp “*De pé no chão também se aprende ler*”, now Café Filho School. A more than deserved tribute, because through this screen, we can learn about the past, discover a woman whose legacies were education and culture as her greatest commitments to the Rocas’ children.

Figure 4 – Painting by the artist Marcelo.



Source: Municipal School Café Filho (2022).

The second painting was a manifestation of personal affection for teacher Nair Oliveira and her family, elucidating once again her importance in the neighborhood as an educator of the artist Wellington Potiguar to the teacher's family, in recognition of the educator importance in his life.

Figure 5 – Painting by the potiguar artist Wellington



Source: Personal family archive (2022).

The campaign “*De pé no chão também se aprende a ler*” lasted a short time, unlike the marks left by Nair Oliveira on her students. The camps were destroyed by an intentional fire in June 1964, which coincides with paramilitary actions, hidden in the dead of night to criminally intercept popular education in the first months of the coup. Add to that the arrest and exile of mayor Djalma Maranhão, sadly recalled by teacher Nair Oliveira (oral report, interview given on 05/08/2022): “All I know in this story is that I didn’t go to see Djalma arrested, I didn’t have the courage”.

With the burning of the camps, dreams were destroyed; not only a government plan was being ruined, but the expectations of *Rocas* residents, teachers and everyone involved in the campaign who believed in the empowerment of the excluded through contextualized education were broken, as stated by Graça Jeane Oliveira (report oral, interview given on 04/24/2022) when remembering the words of professor Nair Oliveira:

It's actually one of the things I noticed that made her sad, when they set fire to the camp. They say it was an accident, but it wasn't. The official story says it was an accident, but she said it wasn't quite that. She said that, after everything was over, the teachers were not fired, but placed in other roles. She said that, to erase the story once and for all, with the project, they set fire to it. Someone was hired to set fire to the school. Nowadays, there are two schools: *Henrique Cartesiano and Café Filho*.

Figure 6 – “*De pé no chão também se aprende a ler*” camp destroyed by flames

Source: <http://www.dhnet.org.br/educar/penochao/imagens.htm>. Accessed on: 22 Feb. 2023.

It was a year of political transformation, especially in the field of education, with book burnings, torture, persecution and exile. These events affected Nair Oliveira so much that since then she has adopted silence as a defense mechanism to avoid remembering this episode, breaking it a few times, like the interviews given to allow this research to be carried out. “[...] Certainly, there are facts from the history of humanity and also from personal life that we would not like to remember, but they remain in our memory [...]” (CORTEZ, 2005, p. 29).

Nair Oliveira faced countless unfavorable situations in the exercise of her educational practices, based on her commitment to being an educator from the periphery, who did not give up on seeking better education for her community. Each experience expanded his professional training and consolidated his critical awareness and dedication to the fight for the democratization of education. After all, “[...] teacher training takes us to a process of personal and professional dimensions, stimulated by experiences and learning acquired throughout life [...]” (ALMEIDA, 2011, p. 4).

It can be said, therefore, that Nair Oliveira's education was closely linked to her choices, the investments in her education and the setbacks and tensions she faced, which made her become the subject of her own story and constituted an identity in constant construction of herself based on the collective relations she built, which she interacted throughout her life. As Josso (2010, p. 81) states: “[...] it is not an individuality without collective anchors (family, belonging to different groups with which each and every one has a history)”, on the contrary, it is a belonging that resulted in admiration and respect for all the work dedicated to countless generations in *Rocas*.

Her experiences and pedagogical practices, socialized, expanded and re-signified in training spaces, allowed a contextualized performance, recognized by her peers, but made invisible by science. In this sense, the story and memories of a poor and peripheral woman are recorded, who was able not only to learn a profession and dedicate herself to teaching, but also to fight for the inclusion of her community in the educational process. Her flag was her commitment to literacy and teaching about social injustices, believing that only with education and knowledge would people be able to free themselves, empower themselves and change their sociocultural context. Nair Oliveira left in the context of Covid-19, in 2020, being the victim of an acute heart attack, however her legacy is perpetuated in the social imagination of *Rocas*.

Final considerations

It is concluded, in this brief period of time that precedes the 1964 military coup, that the resistance of workers and their children in search of formal knowledge and the possibility of social advancement was an uninterrupted battle. The main objective of the campaign “*De pé no chão também e aprende a ler*” was to eradicate the illiteracy that persisted in the city of Natal/RN. Mayor Djalma Maranhão, together with the nationalist committees formed during his administration, in dialogical actions with the poor people of the outskirts of Natal, became entwined in a relentless war against the monster of illiteracy. In every street in the city of Natal/RN, in every alley of *Rocas* and *Canto do Mangue*, the lights of knowledge were penetrating and acting.

It was in the *Rocas* neighborhood where the idea arose and also the first camp based on the popular knowledge of fishermen, artisans, farmers, washerwomen, small traders and many other artisans who contributed their knowledge. Mrs. Nair Oliveira, who arrived very young in the city of Natal/RN, going to live in *Rocas*, participated in this movement since its origin. As a little teacher, she was part of this battle to eradicate illiteracy. She taught her daughters, granddaughters and great-grandson, as well as the children and adults of the *Rocas*, to read and write.

Finally, tributes to her, the little teacher Nair, are written in the people’s memories in the neighborhood. Popular artists paint her face on school walls. The population’s recognition in memory of teacher Nair Oliveira is something enchanting. It is in this vast field of knowledge that we also pay tribute to her. A life dedicated to teaching, cut short in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, with her death resulting from an acute heart attack in 2020. She left us, but her legacy remains on the streets and walls of the neighborhood. Her teachings awakened the taste of many young people who continued with their academic training or interests in the arts, music and literature. Rest in peace, teacher. Despite the military dictatorship of 1964, which set fire to the camp, the campaign “*De pé no chão também de aprende a ler*” was successful; his eternal legacy.

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