



**Difficulties, challenges and satisfaction: working in rural schools according to teachers  
(Ituiutaba-MG, 1970-1990)<sup>1</sup>**

Dificuldades, desafios e satisfação: o trabalho em escolas rurais segundo as professoras  
(Ituiutaba-MG, 1970 a 1990)

Dificultades, retos y satisfacción: el trabajo en las escuelas rurales según las docentes  
(Ituiutaba-MG, 1970 a 1990)

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**Abstract**

We start with the investigation about how the teachers' work was developed in rural schools in the municipality of Ituiutaba-MG, in the period from 1970 to 1990. The objective was to discuss the aspects that concern the teachers' work in multigrade classrooms and the representations built about the teaching profession and the relations with the students and other subject inhabitants in the farms where those schools were installed. We use: interviews, notes, minutes, newspapers, reports, class diaries, personal diaries, technical sheets about schools and legislation. The results indicate that the teacher's work took place in poorly equipped schools and that, once enabled, the teachers faced numerous challenges to overcome various problems. However, their reports are permeated by feelings of recognition on the part of the students and their parents, as well as professional achievement for contributing to the literacy of many children in rural areas.

**Keywords:** History of Rural Education. Rural Professors. Teaching Work.

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## Resumo

Partimos da indagação acerca de como era desenvolvido o trabalho das professoras em escolas rurais do município de Ituiutaba-MG, no período de 1970 a 1990, com o objetivo de discutir os aspectos que concernem ao trabalho docente em salas multisseriadas e as representações construídas sobre a profissão docente e sobre os relacionamentos com os alunos e demais sujeitos habitantes das fazendas onde encontravam-se instaladas aquelas escolas. Utilizamos: entrevistas, anotações, bilhetes, atas, jornais, relatórios, diários de classe, diário pessoal, fichas técnicas sobre as escolas e legislação. Os resultados indicam que o exercício da profissão ocorreu em escolas pouco equipadas e que, embora habilitadas, as professoras enfrentaram inúmeros desafios para superar carências diversas. Não obstante, seus relatos são perpassados por sentimentos de reconhecimento por parte dos alunos e de seus pais, assim como de realização profissional por terem contribuído com a alfabetização de muitas crianças no meio rural.

**Palavras-chave:** História da Educação Rural. Professoras Rurais. Trabalho Docente.

## Resumen

Empezamos con la pregunta acerca de cómo se desarrolló el trabajo de las docentes de las escuelas rurales del municipio de Ituiutaba-MG, de 1970 a 1990, con el objetivo de discutir aspectos concernientes al trabajo docente en aulas multigrado y las representaciones construidas a partir de la profesión docente y de las relaciones con los alumnos y demás sujetos que vivían en las fincas donde estaban ubicadas dichas escuelas. Se utilizaron: entrevistas, apuntes, billetes, actas, periódicos, informes, diarios de clase, diarios personales, hojas informativas sobre escuelas y legislación. Los resultados indican que el ejercicio de la profesión se realizaba en escuelas mal equipadas y que, a pesar de estar calificadas, las docentes enfrentaron numerosos desafíos para superar diversas necesidades. Sin embargo, sus relatos están impregnados de sentimientos de reconocimiento por parte de los alumnos y de sus padres, así como de realización profesional por haber contribuido a la alfabetización de muchos niños del medio rural.

**Palabras-clave:** Historia de la Educación Rural. Maestras Rurales. Trabajo Docente.

## Introduction

The first rural schools in Ituiutaba, in the interior of Minas Gerais (MG), date back to the 1940s, and their expansion occurred gradually in the early 1970s, when the municipality had a total of 72 educational institutions. However, unlike what happened in most of the country, 90% of the rural schools in this municipality emerged between 1950 and 1970 (Majadas, 1991-1993), a period of greater intensity of the migration process from the countryside to the city as a result of, among other factors, the conservative<sup>2</sup> modernization of agricultural and pastoral work.

Since their implementation in Ituiutaba, these schools have supplanted urban establishments. Until the early 1990s, 59 schools were still in operation. It was only in the mid-1990s, due to the nucleation<sup>3</sup> process, this number was drastically reduced and the municipality now had only 5 schools in rural areas (Ituiutaba, 1983 - 1991). The closure of these schools led to reflection about the historical and social processes of the implementation and operation of all of them and consequently, about the responsibilities of the local government in not providing sufficient teaching equipment and not maintaining them adequately under the argument of lack of financial resources.

In fact, rural schools in Ituiutaba were not always prioritized by the municipal government, which demonstrated the scarcity of resources allocated to increasing education offered in rural areas. Thus, due to the limited investment, the rural schools in the municipality operated in precarious conditions. The model was in line with that of rural schools in almost the entire country: multi-grade; single-teacher; most of the teachers were lay; problems with the physical structure of the buildings; inadequate ventilation; lack of running water, sewage systems, electrical installations, toilets, among others. There was also a noticeable undervaluation of teachers, which was evident in the modest salaries they received.

However, these difficulties gradually began to be minimized after Law 5.692/71 (Brazil, 1971) came into effect, when initiatives and strategies to meet its requirements increased, culminating in reforms and expansions of urban and rural schools. However, it was noted that the most effective improvements in working conditions only occurred at the end of the 1980s, after the enactment of the Federal Constitution in 1988 (Brazil, 1988). One of these improvements can be seen in the implementation of transportation using vans with drivers hired by the city government. From then on, teachers were able to travel to farms and return to the cities at the end of classes. This mobility, in addition to providing relative comfort and agility in travel<sup>4</sup>, allowed them to continue their studies during the opposite shift.

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<sup>2</sup> We use the concept of conservative modernization to refer to the period marked by the civil-military dictatorship that began in the country in 1964, when technological innovations arising mainly from research and extension projects implemented by the Luiz de Queiroz College of Agriculture at the University of São Paulo (ESALQ/USP) were applied to agricultural production, “[...] at the same time that archaic structures were preserved and reproduced, such as the landownership agrarian structure, the political-economic oligopolies, the extreme workers exploitation and, more than 500 years after the Portuguese conquest, the ongoing genocide of indigenous and black people in the country.” (Molina; Sanfelice, 2018, p. 323).

<sup>3</sup> Nucleation is understood as the phenomenon that began in the country in the late 1970s and was characterized by the extinction of isolated, single-teacher, multi-grade rural schools and the transfer of their students and teachers to graded schools, sometimes called hub schools or core schools. (Silveira, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> However, it is important to note that the difficulties faced by those transported during the journey were severe. Due to the poor condition of the roads, especially on rainy days, the journey became risky, time-consuming and tiring. However, it was still more comfortable than hitchhiking on the truck that transported the milk or staying on the farm far from family and friends.

This was, therefore, the context from which we set out to propose the question that guided the research, namely, how was the teachers' work<sup>5</sup> in rural schools in the municipality of Ituiutaba-MG developed from 1970 to 1990? Based on this question, the objective of this article is to discuss the aspects concerning the work carried out in rural schools in multi-grade classrooms and the representations<sup>6</sup> constructed by teachers about teaching, students and the rural community.

In addition to the elements of the context discussed previously, the question proposed by the research is justified by the need to know and disseminate the memories concerning a so relevant work to the schooling of children living in rural areas and which, nevertheless, remained relatively invisible in all regions of the country, as can be seen in the extensive research carried out and published under the organization of Chaloba; Celeste Filho and Mesquita (2020).

As a research source, we preferably used the interviews conducted with five teachers, namely Antuza, Lena, Leide, Margarida and Rosa<sup>7</sup>. All of them were selected according to the following criteria: having worked in rural schools in the municipality of Ituiutaba between 1970 and 1990 for a minimum period of two years. The interviews were semi-structured and individual, with questions focused on: the characteristics of the rural educational structure of Ituiutaba, aspects related to the activities developed in the classroom and the teachers' representations about the schools and the students. The records were recorded and later transcribed and printed. In addition to the interviews, we also consulted: notes, minutes of school meetings, minutes of legislative meetings, newspapers, reports, class diaries, personal diaries, technical files about the schools and legislation.

The choice of the period from 1970 to 1990 is justified by the fact that between these decades the entire structure of the rural school network in the municipality of Ituiutaba had already been installed; in addition, due to the rural exodus there was a reconfiguration of schools in rural areas during this period. Another aspect to consider This chronology focused on the transformations resulting from the education reform implemented by Law No. 5,692/71 (Brazil, 1971), which required a minimum secondary education, including for teachers who were already teaching from 1st to 4th grade of primary school (formerly primary school). In other words, the law required these professionals to complete their studies in order to remain in the schools.

In order to present the results, we reached, the text is organized into two sections that will address, respectively, the teaching work, with an emphasis on the teachers' memories of the daily routine in the classrooms in rural areas, and the representations about the relation with the students and other subjects living on the farms where these schools were installed.

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this article, we will use the terms *teaching work* and *teachers' work* to designate both the activities carried out by teachers in their respective schools and to express a given socio-professional status that frames and defines the category of teachers. This appropriation is based on Nóvoa (1995) who, when discussing the present and future of teachers, uses the terms *teaching profession* and *teacher profession* indistinctly. The aforementioned author uses both terms to refer to the attributions in schools and also to the regulations to which this professional category has been subject since the advent of the modern school, whose first regulations intensified from the 18th century onwards, initially in Europe and later in the Americas.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of representations is used in this article, in the sense given to it by Chartier, as a process that constitutes reality through the elaboration of senses that give meaning to reality itself. When understood as a process, representations involve conflicting dimensions, as they are inscribed in a field that includes "concurrences" and "competitions". (Chartier, 1988, p. 17).

<sup>7</sup> Research approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (CEP), UFU, under no. 3,906,622. At the request of this Committee, the identity of the interviewees was preserved by replacing their first names with pseudonyms.

## The teachers' work in rural schools

From the 1940s until the end of the 1990s, the teaching staff in rural schools in Ituiutaba was mostly made up of unqualified teachers, that is, lay teachers. From the 1970s onwards, with the Education Reform resulting from Law No. 5,692 of 1971 (Brazil, 1971), the Normal Course and the Education Institutes, responsible for training teachers for the initial grades, ceased to exist and teacher training for primary education was the responsibility of secondary schools in the so-called Teaching Qualifications, configuring a form of technical and professional education.

According to Moraes (2014), the normal secondary education expansion throughout Brazil did not guarantee the training of teachers in sufficient proportions to meet the primary education needs. Despite the significant number of teachers qualified to teach at primary schools, the demand in primary schools increased each year, and in some regions of the country, the number of lay teachers continued to increase. This situation was due to the fact that, in addition to the insufficient number of professionals, not all qualified people entered the teaching profession.

In the municipality of Ituiutaba, the situation was similar to that seen in the rest of the country, because, despite the increase in the supply of teaching courses at the *Escola Municipal Normal*, starting in 1969, and of the Pedagogy course at the *Faculdade de Filosofia Ciências e Letras de Ituiutaba*, established in the late 1960s, the number of qualified teachers continued to be insufficient to meet the demand for vacancies in the municipality's schools, especially in rural areas, where between 1970 and the early 1990s, 72 schools were still operating.

Specifically regarding the reality studied, we noted that all the teachers interviewed were qualified when they began teaching in rural areas in Ituiutaba and, according to their recollections, not all of them initially aspired to the teaching profession. However, the circumstances and events influenced them to enter the teaching profession. We noted from the reports that between the 1970s and 1990s, factors that limited women from choosing a profession were still very much present. This situation resulted from typical representations of a still patriarchal society and were related to the women's subordination, as well as the presence of meanings incorporated into teaching over time that made teaching one of the few ways for them to occupy a space in society (Louro, 1989).

Therefore, the similarities observed in the justifications for choosing the teaching profession according to the interviewees were not mere coincidence. It was observed that this option, for some, went beyond the vocation or mission of being a teacher, as it allowed them to reconcile work with domestic activities, thus demonstrating that they continued to be responsible for multiple tasks associated with the home, children and family. In this sense, Margarida (2020, p. 3) gave the following account: "I soon got married and it was difficult, right!? Working all day, and I chose to teach, then I had a class in 89 in the rural area".

If, on the one hand, the choice of the teaching profession was based on convenience, on the other hand, teaching in rural schools in the municipality of Ituiutaba, for most of them, was not even remotely an option, but the only way to get started in the teaching profession. To do so, they counted on the benefits of political patronage underlying their hiring. (Assis, 2023).

However, many professionals did not want to work in rural schools due to the obstacles that existed, for example, the difficulties in accessing the farms where the schools were located, the lack of and/or precariousness of transportation and decent housing conditions, among others<sup>8</sup>. These factors, combined with the insufficient support received from the municipal

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<sup>8</sup> Regarding their place of residence, of the five teachers interviewed, four lived in urban areas, three of them worked in schools on farms near the city, and therefore traveled back and forth every day. Lena (2020) was the only one who, in order to teach at the rural school, stayed in the home of the students' family for two years and only traveled to her home in the city on weekends, unlike Antuza (2020) who, although she lived on the farm, had her own residence.

government, made the work of teachers in rural schools a task fraught with obstacles, which explains the impermanence and, consequently, the high turnover, as well as the high number of lay teachers in the profession.

All of these aspects influenced the teachers' desire to work in city schools, even infecting those who lived on farms. In this sense, it would be unlikely that, given these circumstances, teachers would be able to instill in students the values and charms of rural life, thus contradicting the discourse of pedagogical rural way of building rural schools to keep people in the countryside, since most teachers idealized and aspired to work in the city<sup>9</sup>.

Furthermore, the configuration and organization of rural schools ended up requiring teachers to accumulate functions, since in addition to their teaching duties, they were also responsible for the entire administrative side of the school, such as: carrying out the registration system, maintenance and movement of transfer and dropout records, in addition to the repeated search for students who had dropped out in order to guarantee the functioning of the school and the teaching work. As reported by Leide (2020, p. 4):

the school where I worked was reopened so that I could start my work there, the school was closed, no one was interested in continuing, sending a teacher there... and they had this idea that as soon as everything was sorted out there, I would be a teacher [...]. And it happened... [...] '- But here's the thing: you go to the region to look for the registration'. [...] And that's what I did, I called a friend of mine [...]. So, it was so good to go through the neighborhoods, getting to know the reality of how the school operates from door to door.

As previously mentioned, rural schools in Ituiutaba had a single classroom and only one teacher. Between the 1970s and 1990s, they only offered primary education. However, it is important to note that the *Quirino de Moraes* School began offering grades 5 to 8 in 1st grade in 1989 and therefore, adapted another classroom for the 5th grade, consequently expanding the number of classrooms for the 6th, 7th and 8th grades in the following years. Of the five teachers interviewed, four taught in primary school in a multi-grade classroom and only Margarida (2020) worked in the 2nd grade.

This multi-grade classroom structure strongly conditioned the organization of the teachers' work and influenced the conduct of activities with the students, since for them, teaching different grades in the same classroom was one of the greatest difficulties they faced:

It was for 1st to 4th grade, a single room, with double desks, and I had to face the multi-grade system. It wasn't easy, but I did it. There, I had pre-school, first grade, and second grade. So we assessed the child by noticing her/his age, their background, her/his knowledge, right?! (Leide, 2020, p.4).

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<sup>9</sup> "As a way of somewhat containing the acceleration of the rural exodus that occurred at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, seeking to keep workers in the countryside, during the period from 1910 to 1930, the rural school system was expanded through investment in opening more rural schools and adapting them to regional particularities, a process known as "pedagogical rural way". Through the defense of life in the countryside and, consequently, the defense of the need to provide peasants with access to the minimum knowledge that would remove the 'darkness' of ignorance, the aim was to slow the rural exodus. According to Leite, this idealization of peasant life was intended to conceal one of the main concerns of the landowners and also of a portion of the urban capitalists linked to their interests, namely, 'the emptying of the population of rural areas, the social and political weakening of patriarchy and strong opposition to the urban progressive movement, mainly on the part of agro-exporters'. (Leite, 1999, p. 28)". (Lima, 2004, p.104).

In addition, most students started school without having any contact with school knowledge, which made the challenges for teachers in the classroom greater, especially in the first grade, since they entered school without any notion of letters, numbers, quantities, or other school content, as pointed out by Rosa (2020, p. 14):

Look, it was a struggle... it was the eclectic method, right. The boy had never been to school, he started from scratch, without even knowing how to hold a pencil. He had to cope. We used several situations, several alternatives so that the student could learn. I really liked working on word searches, because it was something that the student... I even bought materials, it was word searches, those students who had difficulties, started to have interest and desire to look for words, they considered it very interesting.

Rosa's statement (2020) identifies with the study by Lima (2012, p. 140) who says that it is common for teachers to use different tactics to teach in multi-grade classrooms, such as:

the use of string and the 'place value chart' to explain in a more concrete way the mathematical relation between sets and numerals; the use of alphabet cards, creation of stories, poems and games, filling out checks, writing telegrams and letters (exchanged between students) and solving crosswords to teach reading and writing; promoting mini-debates and theaters, creating platforms with boards and boxes, using microphones made with tomato paste cans and string to develop communication.

Each of them had their own way of organizing the classroom. Normally, the students were arranged in rows, one for each grade; the blackboard was also divided into sections. Regarding this aspect, the teachers reported the following:

I divided, I put the third graders together, the fourth graders together, the second graders together... I divided the students into desks. First graders, second graders, third graders, fourth graders... since the desks provided this opportunity, they were separated and I divided the board as well. The board was divided in the direction of each grade and was placed on the desk so that they had a greater view of the blackboard (Rosa, 2020, p. 11).

I arrived with the material and, as if it were a mimeograph machine, we copied and arrived with the page for each one and they did it, because... a little was left on the board... let's say that the more advanced students, third graders on the board, the others who were already there, we took material to them to copy (Antuza, 2020, p. 20).

Regarding lesson planning, the five interviewees reported that this practice was neither structured nor well-founded as it is today. Most of them planned their lessons weekly, however, without adopting the formal criteria that planning requires. Similar curricular components were applied to rural and urban education, without any adaptation to rural areas. The content was covered in the disciplines of Portuguese, Mathematics, History, Geography, Sciences and Moral, Social and Civic Education (Registro, 1973).

The teachers, according to them, received teaching programs with the content that should be covered throughout the year, and were left to their discretion as to the strategies to be used. As a result, autonomy in teaching strategies was due to precariousness and was almost obligatory. After all, they should have taken the initiative to adopt the methodologies that seemed most appropriate in the places where they worked, given the relative neglect and frequent lack of support from the Department of Education for rural schools further away from the city.

The classes were planned based on the appropriations that they formed during the period in which they were students, as well as about research and planning, in accordance with the words of Tardif (2000, p. 13), for whom “a good part of what teachers know about teaching, about the roles of teachers and about how to teach comes from their own school life history”.

When asked about the fact that they used any local peculiarities in planning their classes, they all said no, stating that they had difficulty thinking about content for that place, for that people. They justified that their training at the time was not sufficient to be able to work with the specificities of the rural environment. However, they considered that there should be no differences between the curricula of urban schools and those of rural schools. Lena (2020, p. 7), when asked about using the students' daily lives in planning her classes, responded that: “No, I didn't. Because I had no experience with the farm, right. So, I don't remember working with them like that... using their daily lives, no [...]”. Also on this aspect, Antuza (2020, p. 8) said:

No. We didn't have that ability, nowadays teaching methods require it like this... something happens, so let's talk about that, right... [...]. I don't remember, but I don't think we had that ability, no, because we had to follow... we had to follow the program and we couldn't doze off too much.

As discussed in the previous pages, the gap between the curricula and practices of teachers in rural schools and those in cities was and continues to be an indication of how neglected the incorporation of the ideals of pedagogical rural way was (Leite, 1999). The vector was always the city, understood as the *locus* of progress and the “modern” world. References to the urban world underlay the school calendar, the curriculum and the content of activities and assessments. For this reason, we believe that the unanimity of the teachers interviewed in saying that they were not prepared to adapt teaching to the rural reality is justifiable and also understandable.

The analysis of the reports shows that, despite the difficulties, the teachers did not deny the importance of planning and, although the curriculum was disconnected from the reality of the students, they sometimes sought tactics in an attempt to contextualize teaching and make it closer to the students. Leite, for example, reported that she had the habit of collecting materials from around the school to work on in Science, Math, Geography and History classes and also spoke of the joy she felt when she taught a practical class:

Look how cool it was, I've never forgotten it! [...] in science, soil types [...] I went out with them, a lady had an activity in the classroom so I could go out with the third grade boys, near the river, there, to find types of soil. Erosion. I worked hard! So what did I do? Fine sand, coarse sand, sand colors, it changes, right? The darker soil, the lighter soil. So, I'll never forget that practical class! Because there's nothing better for a boy from the countryside to experience what he's going through in his daily life. In his surroundings. So, I won't forget that class... it was really nice! [...] Mom made savory snacks, I washed the jars of hearts of palm,



peas, olives and took off the labels. I separated and made all types of soil, because I wanted to teach a class about soil. [...] I had a friend - now deceased -, owner of the flour factory there on 32nd, he used to fish, so I would say: - 'Friend, when are you going fishing? Can you bring me some sand?' ... it was white sand, just like this paper here. And that class was very rich... look at all the good things I kept! So many things, but this one was memorable... I took care of everything! It was a practical class, the day I had to go out with the boys in the fourth and third grades, so they could stay with *Dona Liliozi* and the older girl would help look at me, stay there with them, play... there was no shortage of toys! Activities... [...] so, I went out... it didn't take long, because. What was erosion? For them, you know: 'It's the ravine!' - I said: - 'Step on it here, it fell apart, it fell'. Things that they would use for the rest of their lives. (Leide, 2020, p. 21-22).

Regarding this aspect, Rosa reported that she found it easy to integrate things from around the school into activities in the classroom and so she used what she had available for her classes.

For example, leaves, flowers, sand, water, colored soil, soil, mountains. So, I found it very easy to do work. We collected leaves, fruits and... so, we worked there in the area of science, yes..., geography, history, even in Portuguese. [...] we did it, I started one as if it were an essay, a dissertation, I started. I put it on the board and then each student would add to it, no matter the grade, you know? They would add to it and I would put in order what they were saying about that collection. So, we were working about all the content and those children who still didn't know how to read and write had the motivation to learn to read and write too. (Rosa, 2020, p. 10).

Despite difficult conditions, the teacher managed to find ways of doing things and did not remain static in the face of the lack of materials, the deficient physical structure of the school and the heterogeneous classroom. It is no coincidence that, for Certeau (1985), social relations are formed by everyday practices that reveal the different ways of doing things with the use of tactics, from which subjects elaborate aspects that make up the professional, social, political and cultural dimensions. It is clear, therefore, that in the school environment, teaching work was developed through interventions in everyday life that went far beyond the relation between teacher and student in the context of the classroom.

Over time, teaching work was improved, especially in the case of teachers Leide and Rosa, who were already studying Pedagogy when they were teachers in the rural area of Ituiutaba. Although none of them had specific training for rural teaching, they all considered that the knowledge acquired in the institutions where they were trained was appropriate for both urban and rural schools.

In Leide's (2020) class diary, it is noted that there were thirty-five students in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades, aged between 9 and 15 years old. The presence of students ranged from young children to teenagers (Registro, 1973). This was a significant number of students, especially considering the school's lack of physical structure, as it operated in an adapted room in the house where a family lived, as reported by teachers Leide (2020) and Antuza (2020). Thus, the teachers needed to create ways to teach several students in different grades simultaneously; to do so, they combined the knowledge gained from their training as teachers with everyday actions.

In the words of Tardif (2002, p. 39), "this knowledge arises from experience and is validated by it", since the initial training that teachers receive is not always sufficient to face the real problems of teaching, given that many times, during the training courses, a vision of teaching is constructed does not correspond to the practical reality of the classroom. In other words, when the teacher leaves the training process, he or she is faced with situations in which the theoretical foundations learned are not always sufficient to carry out teaching, which makes it necessary for him or her to resort to the practical experiences of other teachers.

In the case of teaching in rural schools in the municipality of Ituiutaba, this exchange of experiences was not always possible, especially for teachers who lived on the most distant farms, because in addition to the distance, there was isolation, since almost all of them were single-teacher schools. For those located in rural areas closer to the city, there were more possibilities for interaction between rural and urban teachers, in addition to the support more effective didactic-pedagogical approach by the Municipal Department of Education.

As for the curriculum used in these schools, it was found that it favored an urban vision of education and development, that is, it was not adapted to local peculiarities, thus revealing the lack of specialized knowledge and public policies for basic education in rural areas.

In the 1970s, in Ituiutaba, the educational ideology continued to focus on keeping people in the countryside. However, the local government's projects, as well as those of other municipalities throughout the country, to contain the rural exodus through education, in addition to being ineffective, were not enough to adapt teaching to rural specificities. In fact, in this municipality,

The focus was more on preventing the emptying of the countryside, and less on the type and quality of schooling offered; more about civilizing the country man, and less about a pedagogy that could go beyond eradicating illiteracy. The official discourse may even reveal political and educational intentions for rural education by assuming an education system, but the implementation of such discourse fell short of practice. (Ribeiro, Silva and Quillici Neto, 2020, p. 5)

It was found that none of the interviewees were aware of the local government's project to stop the migration of the population from the countryside to the city, therefore it can be deduced that its implementation did not aim to involve rural schools and was aimed solely at the Municipal Agricultural School. According to Leide (2020, p. 15), the concern with education was more focused on literacy, "There were still a lot of illiterate people... They had this concern. [...] They had to teach these children to read and write for the future, right?! So that's where they opened schools so they could study...".

In their statements, the teachers hardly commented about the aspects involving the curricular content taught. In their memories, the most striking facts are related to the organization and arrangement of students by school level, due to the multi-grade system, which for them represented one of the greatest challenges of teaching.

Regarding the pedagogical support provided by the Municipal Department of Education, the reports were quite similar. Of the five interviewees, only Leide said that she had received effective monitoring by school supervisors:

Because the school was close to Ituiutaba, the visits were really frequent, supervisor, educational advisor, they visited the school in the rural area. Because it was a rural area, Tancredo de Paula Almeida, sometimes you didn't even know that a visitor was coming and the van stopped. It is very

important to have that responsibility. [...] A technical, pedagogical visit... to provide support, a backup for learning. To find out what was needed, what was happening at the school... Because it was very good. We would come to Ituiutaba to the secretariat and to the monthly meetings to acquire this luggage, but what we had was the support of the Department of Education. As it still works today, the ones from here go to the farm... [...] they went in two or three, wait, they came in, it was the monthly visit. The visit that arrived unexpectedly. But that was very good, that this It helped us a lot to grow (Leide, 2020, p. 4-5).

According to Lena (2020, p. 11), the school hardly received visits from school supervisors and when they did, it was mostly to deal with administrative issues. “I think about twice a year or when there was some... some little meeting, like that, they went there... we had to prepare to receive them there, you know?”. Antuza (2020, p. 14) said that she did not remember exactly, but that she thought the visits happened every three months, but they were less to help with classroom activities and more to demand: “-Ah... Do this better... like this’. He looked at the lesson plan... He did not give suggestions, he just saw if it was working, I think”. About this aspect, Rosa vented:

No, there were always... there were pedagogical visits, but the visits were more for demands and not for help. They were for demands! [...] The supervisor went. Then they checked the students' notebooks, the lesson plan... the lesson plan, from when I started until I was a supervisor and as a teacher at *Quirino de Moraes*, all rural, is. The lesson plan, was weekly, because a daily one was not possible, it was weekly. You put the items that you were going to work on during the week, then the pedagogues from Ituiutaba looked (sic) at the student's notebook and my lesson plan to see if there was correspondence. So, it was not help, it was a demand! So, you had to work even if the demands came, you know? (Rosa, 2020, p. 22).

It can be inferred, therefore, that most of the supervisors' visits to schools were almost always aimed at monitoring the teacher's performance. It should also be noted that teacher meetings and gatherings to discuss teaching and pedagogical issues were held in the city and usually involved all teachers from the municipal system (rural and urban). Teachers who taught in schools located on more distant farms rarely participated in educational events promoted by the Department of Education (Lena, 2020).

All of these aspects had an impact on the daily lives of rural education teachers. When recounting their memories, the teachers recalled significant and memorable moments in their rural teaching careers; however, the difficulties were determining factors for them not to continue working on the farms. For some of them, working in rural schools represented not only teaching, not only a love for the profession, but a necessary sacrifice to later enter urban schools. Leide, for example, believed she deserved a place in the city, given that she had already had teaching experience in rural areas and was studying Pedagogy. In a tone of defiance, she said: “They were all qualified, through the Normal course, right, but they didn't have a higher education. So much so that I was studying with my colleagues supervising me” (Leide, 2020, p. 19). From this statement, it is possible to see that there was no equality of opportunities and also that the best professional qualifications were not always a prerequisite for occupying positions in the area of education in the municipality.

As demonstrated so far, the teachers highlighted various difficulties of teaching in rural areas. However, although it may seem contradictory, it was observed in the statements the presence of very happy memories during the period in which they worked in those schools. The main ones being those related to the relations among teachers, students and the community in general, which will be addressed in the following item.

### **The teachers, their students, and the rural community**

It was found in the reports, as well as in the other documents researched, that the rural community of the municipality of Ituiutaba played a significant role in the education of its children, both through the installation and maintenance of rural schools and by welcoming the teachers into the homes of farmers or in some improvised accommodation.

It was also noted that the school community recognized the importance of the work performed by the teachers in the rural schools and, above all, in the education of their children. According to the memories and experiences reported, the teachers felt valued and respected. For them, the students were the bucolic representation of the country man: docile, hard-working, and humble. For this reason, they felt safer during classes, as Margarida (2020, p.5-6) said:

the boys were so like that... that only those who arrived with that determination, with that desire to learn and it was very enjoyable, rewarding. [...] What helped me a lot was that the students on the farm are simpler and we already had a good experience here in the city, so it helped a lot.

The teachers' representations of the students at the rural school made it possible to see that there are characteristics of rural culture that overlap in their observations. The view of the peasant as a "humble and respectful country man" makes up a set of dispositions, which can be called habitus (Bourdieu, 1989), which became typical of rural culture and which the teachers appropriated and transferred to the students. In this sense, they felt more valued and felt that they had authority, respect and social recognition from the students, as well as from their families and the entire community that lived on the farm where the school was operating. In addition, in many narratives we came across stories of demonstrations of affection, for example, in the excerpt from one of the interviews transcribed below.

That little pine tree was a gift. This gemstone, it was a little gift from a student whose father lived nearby there... [...] from that time! This little pine tree... something old, from my mother's time... [...] – 'Auntie, here's where mommy I gave it to you, daddy made it!' .... [...] a lot of good relations among parents, parties, birthdays. My birthday was Teacher's Day, so can you imagine, October 15th, right?! So it was a party, a surprise... , so it was a really good time! Really nice! I'll tell you that today they're here... they found me on the internet, right? [...] Chicken.... A party! They said something like: - 'Auntie, my mother told you to wait just a little bit when we have to leave, because she has something to give you!'. It was clean chicken. And the vegetables were from the region, very close by. I got a lot of vegetables. [...]. It was really good! (Leide, 2020, p. 16).

Regarding these aspects, Antuza said that in the schools where she worked there were no meetings, parties or celebrations, but it was common for mothers to go to school to talk,

The fathers lived far away... everyone worked, had to weed, the women made food... The mothers were the ones who liked to go to school. But it was to be socializing, right. Suddenly, the student would come and there would be the mother too... not to complain, to talk... just to socialize. To hang out, right. (Antuza, 2020, p. 15).

Margarida was the only one who stayed at the rural school until she retired. According to her testimony, like the others, despite the challenges she faced, she recognized that the students from the rural area, as well as their families and the community in general, had a lot of affection and respect for her.

The parents were all over us, delighted! They considered us like... almost like a goddess, at school. They had a lot of respect, you know. - And then, 'how's my son...' and so on, she would bring us snacks, she would bring us a treat... On the farm they are so funny... I'm still friends with some parents to this day. It was very rewarding, we had meetings and they always went, sometimes a student with a low grade was called individually, they went... they had their own transport, they would go... even if it was just the cart, they went. [...] I was treated with a lot of respect... There was a lady there whose husband, Mr. Quirino, was the one who gave us the land to build the school, right, and when we didn't have lunch, every day we went to her house, before picking up the students downstairs, she gave us dinner, and another lady there, Marli Paranaíba, would send us pig skin, or if we arrived early, she called... she called us to have dinner at her house, the one who didn't have the first class, went there and have dinner and bring it. She gave us sweets, you have to see how cute! And when there were two schools, Quirino and João Ribeiro da Silva, they threw a Teachers' Day party that really left a mark on me. It was just that school, João Ribeiro da Silva, with 23 students. Then the parents got together, bought a crate of *guaraná*, and found out that my birthday was on October 15th. So they divided the board, the board was huge. They paid tribute to me on half of the board: 'Teacher Margarida, congratulations!' And on the other side they wrote: 'Congratulations to all the teachers and Margarida on your double day!'. Guys, they made a chicken stew that I've never had before, a vinaigrette mixed with cassava. They gave me a present. Oh my! Now, the worst part was when I ate pepper, it was so hot, you know? I almost ran out to the corral because my mouth was burning. So, they loved us. The parents made a point of going. They were the ones who made it. So, it was really tasty, you know? Very, very much! (Margarida, 2020, p. 18; 25).

Regarding the participation of parents in the daily school routine, whether by welcoming teachers into their homes or by getting directly involved in festivities and other celebrations, we understand that this is an important device for attributing meanings to the school that go beyond its primary teaching and learning functions. The active presence of the rural community in that environment configures a given dimension of the school culture that, according to Viñao Frago (1995), is expressed, in particular, in the multiple uses of the space.

For the author, such uses can demonstrate the different meanings that the subjects construct and attribute to their surroundings<sup>10</sup>.

Therefore, the involvement of the rural community with the schools made these institutions an extension of the daily lives of families, gave the subjects living in rural areas a sense of belonging and helped to break the isolation in which they lived, being far from urban centers. Consequently, the interaction among parents and other family members with students and teachers strengthened the ties of sociability among these people and, consequently, made rural schools essential in the places where they were located. In fact, Morais, in his master's research on a school in the district of Martinésia, in the municipality of Uberlândia-MG, found that:

The considerations reported by our interviewees confirm the importance of the school, identifiable both from an individual perspective and from a collective and community perspective. It seems inconceivable that the district could exist without the school, which has become one of its most characteristic and representative features. For them, the importance of the school for the district, as well as for the region linked to it, is indisputable, being all too obvious and proven through different examples that reflect how fundamental it was and enumerate various facets of the social functions that the institution performed or at least ensured for the multiple generations that passed through it. (Morais, 2020, p.207-208)

The interviewed teachers expressed a variety of feelings and emotions when talking about their professional experiences. According to Lena (2020), the respect and mutual affection between her and the entire community were fundamental factors in her staying at the school during the two years she worked at *Fazenda Monjolinho*. According to the teacher, the teaching experiences and the moments of socialization at the school resulted in unforgettable emotional bonds. As she continued her interview, she recalled photographs and messages that she still keeps, which leads one to believe that her experiences accompanied her beyond the classroom and how teaching at that school represented significant moments in her memories of teaching. When recalling the times, she worked at the school, Lena transports to other social spaces the marks and elements that materialize the teaching activity. This appropriation refers to the analysis by Arroyo (2004, p. 27) according to which,

School times invade all other times. We take home the tests and notebooks, the teaching materials and the preparation of the classes. We carry anxieties and dreams from school to home and from home to school. We cannot stop these times because being teachers is part of our personal lives. It is another us.

As these representations of school and teaching were socially constructed and historically legitimized, they are not easily undone, and they also exert a social and cultural weight on teaching work, whether it is carried out in urban or rural schools. In her testimony, Lena mentioned the emotional farewell to the Adelino de Freitas Carvalho School. The

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<sup>10</sup> “Physical space is, for human beings, appropriated space – territory – and arranged and inhabited space – place. In this sense, space is a social construction and school space is one of the modalities of its conversion into territory and place. Hence, space is never neutral but a sign, symbol and a reflection of the condition and relations of those who inhabit it. It shows, to those who know how to read, the use that human beings make of it.” (Viñao Frago, 1995, p. 69).

following excerpt refers to the teacher's entry in her personal diary about the end of the school year in 1982, in which we can see the friendship established with the entire community, especially with the family that hosted her throughout the period:

I keep in my heart the gratitude that Vilminha's mother, my best student, said. - 'Thank you for taking such good care of my daughter.' She hugged me and asked me to come back next year. The people from my house, Dona Dalíria, Divaní, Alzira, Regina, Valtenes, will be unforgettable to me, because they left a big mark on my life with their immense affection and dedication throughout the year. In the last few days we were even closer. We went to the stream every day to bathe and sunbathe, we collected a lot of *gabirola* and played and walked a lot, etc. December 1st was the day we left. I got up early and got ready to leave. I hugged Dona Dalíria very affectionately and noticed that she was a little choked up, looking like she wanted to cry and I was almost crying too. She always went to the porch when I came to the city and that day the three girls went to the bus stop with me. When we got to the *colchete*, I noticed that she was not on the porch and I told Divaní to stay with her, because I thought she was crying. So we said goodbye and she went back. [...] Alzira and Regina went with me to the bus stop and when we said goodbye, Regina said to me: - '[...] don't forget us, come back soon'. I will never forget you, because I love you all very much. (Lena, 1981, unpagged).

It is clear that a relation of gratitude and friendship was established between the teacher and the entire community in the region where the school was located. According to Lena, some events held at the school, such as the June festival, Olympic sports and projects developed by the *Empresa de Assistência Técnica e Extensão Rural do Estado de Minas Gerais (EMATER)* in the region helped bring the entire local community closer together. Her involvement in these events was deeply marked in her memories, as demonstrated in her diary, in which she recorded her participation with her students in the 1st Rural Olympics, in 1983, which was organized jointly by EMATER, the *Movimento Brasileiro de Alfabetização (MOBRAL)* and the rural municipal schools of Ituiutaba. (Lena, 1981).

Lena also recorded her first years as a teacher in her diary; she recalled with emotion the pride and satisfaction of having worked at the Adelino de Oliveira Carvalho School, and showed approval for the choice of profession that she held until she retired, certain that she had done her duty. Of the two schools where she worked, she has the best memories of her students:

The profession that I chose and that I am currently working in is teaching. Thank God, I adore and love my students very much. They are all dear to me, but without us wanting to, there are some that captivate our hearts more. [...]. The first time he [the father] told me that I was going to lose the girls [students] it broke my heart, but I didn't think it would happen so quickly. Today, the last day of school, they came to my house to get the report card (SIC) and say that they were leaving on Sunday. I couldn't hold it in and I cried, we all cried. (Lena, 1981, unpagged).

Although Lena said that she initially did not want to be a teacher and that she took a technical course in teaching because her mother forced her to, we can see the missionary nature that she took on in her early years as a teacher. All the difficulties, as well as the sacrifices, according to her narrative, were elements that made up the “teaching mission”. This representation was recurrent in the narratives of rural teachers. According to Assis (2018, p. 63): “The representations constructed about the difficulties of teaching in rural areas also highlighted the missionary notion of education [...]”.

The testimonies, especially those of teacher Lena, also showed the emotional relation of teaching as a motivator for daily work. In addition, the permanence in teaching was almost always attributed to the appreciation by the rural community, as reiterated by the teacher in her diary in 1983: “I finished another year of struggle and much love in my school and on my farm, together with my 2nd lovely family. Everything ended in the Holy Peace of God. My students were all lovely. [...]”. (Lena, 1981, unpagged). In fact, according to Weiduschadt and Amaral (2016, p. 1011), “The recognition of their work and the status achieved within the group compensated for the adversities inherent to teaching in rural areas”.

The importance these teachers have or have had in the school initiation of countless children in the schools they have attended has left its mark, because they were not only present in these contexts, but they also acted and reacted, causing changes. On the other hand, they were also influenced by their environment and transformed themselves. Their experiences accompanied them beyond the classrooms and outside the school walls, and were inscribed in their memories, as can be seen in the following content extracted from Lena's diary:

End – 1982. The year passed as everything does. It was wonderful, I worked hard and with a lot of love. My first year of service is over, I gained a lot of experience with my dear students. I was very happy in my first year of work. On December 30th, the last day of school, we said goodbye with a chicken stew and I was also going to hand out the report cards (SIC), all my students came, almost all the parents and the people from the house where I lived. (Lena, 1981, unpagged).

The pages of this diary record the dedication and love with which the teacher carried out her work in the two rural schools in the municipality of Ituiutaba. Although rural education has been neglected in many ways by the municipal government, based on the context in which they were inserted, the teachers built in their daily lives tactics and ways of doing things through which they were able to perform their duties (Certeau, 2002).

Although the teachers' memories included difficulties faced, such as, for example, lack of transportation, multi-grade classrooms, lack of pedagogical support, shortage of teaching materials, deficiencies in school buildings, multiple tasks, among other factors, it is clear that, in a certain way, they lessened the problems. For them, each period in history had its own difficulties and advantages. Regarding this aspect, Antuza (2020, p. 17) said: “When we live in a certain period and someone else sees the old period, they think that those times were difficult, right? It was normal, it was a normal time, it was that model”.

At times, they seemed to normalize the difficulties, as well as imprint a certain way of romanticize around the specificities of the hard work developed in the rural school. We believe that such representation is a result of the temporality that underlies the process of remembering, after all, “The act of remembering, in turn, happens within time, which actively participates in the process.” (Assmann, 2011, p. 34). In this sense, and understanding memory as a work (Seixas, 2013), the subject, when remembering, moves from the present, the moment in which the remembrance occurs, to the past where he or she searches for the remembered event and from there returns to the present in the act of constructing and verbalizing the memory, that is,



producing the narrative. In this winding trajectory, the person not only remembers, but also forgets and remains silent about possible traumatic episodes. The result is often characterized by the creation of uplifting and pleasurable memories and the silencing of conflicts, problems and traumas, as Pollak (1989) rightly analyzed.

The teachers emphasized the “good side” and mitigated the obstacles faced in the rustic rural schools. Without realizing it, with this memory work they ended up exempting the municipal government from its responsibilities, took on responsibilities that were not theirs, placed themselves at the mercy of welfare programs and made sacrifices through overlapping tasks and the consequent intensification of the workday. By understanding teaching as a mission, the teachers

justified the slowness of government measures to improve and/or invest in rural schools, in the development of attractive job and career plans, as well as in investments in conditions and training focused on work. (Assis, 2018, p. 63).

Although they were valued by their students and the community in general, their work was often overlooked by public authorities and educational policies. This is not to say that there was no struggle for improvements in working conditions, since it is known that for decades, Basic Education teachers have been demanding professional recognition, which contributed to intensifying discussions around their basic and continuing education, the desired level of qualification and salary issues. (Saviani, 2007).

## **Final Considerations**

The five teachers interviewed presented many points in common in their professional trajectories, such as, for example, the poor conditions existing in the schools where they worked. All educational establishments had similar characteristics and, as it had already mentioned, were precarious. Furthermore, teaching work was underpinned by the overload of tasks under the responsibility of a single teacher, who also had to be the lunch lady, the cleaner, and the secretary. All of this was carried out without effective support from specialists and, most importantly, without a proper salary increase.

Specifically regarding teaching work, one aspect worth highlighting was the fact that, although qualified, when they entered rural schools they had to mobilize a lot of experience and creativity to achieve results in their work. The training they received and the curriculum of rural schools focused on urban reality, without any reference to the specificities of the rural universe, combined with the difficulties and challenges imposed on them by teaching in multi-grade classrooms, amplified the difficulties of the task they had to perform.

However, it is clear that, even in the midst of the problems they faced, they remembered with great ease the moments considered significant during the period in which they exercised their teaching career. Of these moments, they gave emphasis to those related to relations and coexistence with students and family members. All the interviewees reported satisfaction for having been teachers and contributed to the education of many students who are now employed; they were proud when their former students, now adults, recognized them and expressed their gratitude.

These aspects, which are notably striking in the reports, in addition to arising from the specificity of the effort of memory, as discussed, also arise from the intricate relationship between the social experience experienced and the convictions built during the career. In fact, as analyzed by Certeau (1994, p. 142), “for there to be culture, it is not enough to be the author of social practices; these social practices must have meaning for the person who carries them

out”. Thus, acting as a teacher was the result of an entire cultural process that involved training, professionalization and practices and that went beyond the normal and academic school benches. In this sense, in order to understand the representations constructed by the teachers interviewed, it was necessary to consider, in addition to their working and training conditions, the life trajectory of each of them, as well as the sociocultural relations built along the way.

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