

A Campaign to Establish a Secondary School in a Rural community in Brazil

"We had to work long and hard to get it"

The village of Mirantão, together with the valleys that surround it, forms an isolated rural community in the southern part of the state of Minas Gerais in Brazil. The population of Mirantão is around 1,000. Members of this community successfully campaigned for a new secondary school to improve the lives of their children because, up to that point, the children had been obliged to make the long and tiring journey to a secondary school in the neighbouring state. Although this campaign was an important step in the community's appreciation of the power of collective action, it was not without its difficulties. This article gives an insight into the experience of this Brazilian community, and offers some ideas on the importance of achieving quality education for all.

The village primary school

A primary school was first opened in Mirantão in the late 1940s, initially only for boys. Even though girls were eventually admitted, only a very small proportion of local children ever attended school. This meant that many adults in the community never had the chance to learn to read or write.

As in many other rural communities in Brazil, the nearest secondary school was a long way away. When they left primary school, usually at age 11, children had to go to Visconde de Mauá, a town in the neighbouring state of Rio de Janeiro, to continue their education. As recently as 20 years ago, before there was a daily bus service to Visconde de Mauá, only the children of families with relatives or good friends in town could leave the village to pursue a secondary education.

Once the bus service started, the municipality rented a minibus to bring children living in the surrounding countryside into Mirantão so that they could catch the bus to school. That meant spending four hours in a bus every day, along badly-maintained roads. So many children dropped out of school at that point. Mauricio, a local agricultural technician, recalls his own experience:

"So that I could carry on studying after my fourth year of primary school in Mirantão, I used to set off early from the village with my father in his truck, giving him a hand as he picked up milk from nearby farms. When we got to Visconde de Mauá, I would find somewhere to have a quick shower, get changed and go to school. It would be evening before I got home, catching the only bus that went to Mirantão. Despite these difficulties, my parents always encouraged us. That's how I managed to finish my education."

The village primary school and the education system as a whole were not highly regarded. Parents complained, and a number of them declared that they had never learned anything in class, and their children were doing no better. Teachers' contracts were short-term. Most parents failed to respond to the staff's attempts to engage, making it difficult to create links between the school and the community. Moreover, the curriculum was ill-suited to the reality of daily life in the country.

Against this difficult backdrop, in July 2012, Mariana and Eduardo, two members of the ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps, moved to the village and enrolled their children at the primary school. When

Mariana took her son in for his first day the teacher told her, "Your son will be the only one of these children to go to university." Mariana could immediately see that something was not quite right and refused to accept this fatalistic view. She and Eduardo decided to get involved. They had meetings with the teaching staff. They also tried to get in touch with the parents who lived furthest away from the school — adults who had been obliged to work from a young age in order to survive. For them, the teachers and the school itself were a painful reminder that they themselves never had the chance to get an education.

"Our knowledge isn't valued"

Mariana and Eduardo became involved with village life and patiently built links with the local community. They began with a project called "life in abundance," named after something that they were told by one of the villagers:

"In the old days¹ life was difficult but we were happier. There were more fiestas and other communal activities. Community spirit was stronger. There was **life in abundance**, which has disappeared from today's society. Now it's all about consumerism, not about your neighbors. The education system doesn't respect our skills. So our knowledge isn't valued."

The two volunteers made themselves available, took an interest in other people, and were always ready to share simple things such as their time, know-how, vegetables from their garden, etc. They did their best to understand what it meant to be poor in Mirantão. Mariana explains:

"Local people were telling us: 'There's a poverty of spirit here.' I didn't understand what they meant, so I kept my eyes open. And what I saw was anxiety and depression. Society does not value certain kinds of knowledge, nor does it recognize some learning styles.² People realize this and begin to lose sight of who they are. Poverty here means a loss of identity and a lack of recognition."

What Mariana and Eduardo could see happening before their eyes has been described by the eminent educationalist Majid Rahnema as the difference between "convivial poverty,"³ characterized by "a way of life driven by circumstance, the need for social cohesion, and the need to exist in harmony with nature" and "modernized poverty," which produces victims [...] torn by needs which are social constructs, but which they are never able to meet owing to a lack

¹ From the 1960s onwards, factors such as: improvements to infrastructure, the arrival of television, cultural changes, laws prohibiting certain agricultural practices (which left farmers much worse off), a lack of agrarian reform, the development of tourism, and changes in land use, all had an adverse effect on the local populations and resulted in widespread urban migration.

² For more information consult the section on "Relational Dynamics" and, in particular, "Unrecognized Contributions" BRAY R., DE LAAT M. et al, *Hidden Dimension of Poverty*. Montreuil, Éditions Quart Monde, 2019, page 19-23.

³ Majid RAHNEMA, *Obstacles sur le chemin d'une conversation sur la pauvreté, Défaire le développement. Refaire le monde* (Obstacles to a Conversation About Poverty, Undoing Development: Remaking the World). Parangon/La Ligne d'horizon, Paris, 2003, page 130. The quotes that follow in this paragraph are all from this source, unless indicated otherwise.

of resources." This new form of poverty, which is born out of pain and suffering, is characterized by a lack of recognition of traditional knowledge and community know-how.

In search of a teaching method that helps all children to succeed

At the school, Mariana and Eduardo got to know Suzana, the teacher responsible at that time for coordinating the educational team. In 2015, at the suggestion of Mariana and Eduardo, Suzana persuaded her team to invite Portuguese educator [José Pacheco](#) to Mirantão, where a meeting was arranged with 150 people from the village and local area. Pacheco is known in Brazil for creating inclusive schools where everyone learns and where children rejected by conventional education can find their feet. In 2011, he founded a school in one of São Paulo's three most violent slums. Having experienced poverty himself, Pacheco developed a different way of seeing life and education by creating a learning community where everyone is both a student and a teacher. As he explained:

"We don't learn in a building where there are classes, levels, semesters, a principal. We learn through relationships, through our connections with each other. [...] It's the community, the families themselves, that run the school. We work across the entire community, not just in the school building."

This meeting marked a turning point. Teachers were able to say how overwhelmed they were by bureaucracy. They realized that education can be reinvented to put children, with their needs and curiosity, right at the center of learning. This model is based on the idea that everyone involved in education — teachers, children, parents, and the community — has a role to play in building a shared future. Even though achieving this might require considerable effort, the teachers felt a new sense of hope and motivation. They rediscovered meaning, pride, and a new desire to invest in children.

Community involvement in learning

In Brazil, traditional public education is based on what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire calls a "banking concept." In this distorted view of education, there is no creativity, no transformation, no knowledge...students spend their time archiving the "deposits" that are given to them."⁴

Under the traditional system the teacher is an authority figure, as Suzana explained during José Pacheco's visit:

"Teaching at the school in Mirantão has always been and remains mainly traditional, based exclusively on textbooks that are totally disconnected from the reality of the community. I started working at the school in 2013. When I arrived at the school that year, the classes were small. For example, I started working with a fifth-grade class that only had three students. I was a newly qualified teacher, unfortunately with no experience, no support, no teaching advice, so we did what we knew, what we'd learned at university during our

⁴Paulo FREIRE, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Paris, Maspero, 1974. Quoted in *Des livres et les idées!* ("Books and Ideas"), CRÉA, No.54, February 2010, p. 7-8.

internships. But that's not always the best solution and there's no guarantee that it will work."

Pacheco's visit gave the teachers the opportunity to rethink their approach, to understand the importance of their work, and the influence it has on children. They also began to grasp that education is not only a fundamental right; it is also a powerful lever for social change. From the moment the school opened up in the village — inviting adults from the community to share their knowledge with the children — opinions and attitudes began to change. "Life skills met school skills," explained Mariana. She had asked one of the village grandmothers to help her and the children plant a vegetable garden. Initially, the grandmother had told her:

"I'm not good at anything. I was the worst student at this school in my time; all I ever got there was punishment, because I was a terrible student. And for my grandson today, it's the same."

After the teachers invited her to come every week, the woman's grandson, one of the most challenging and misunderstood children, would say, "My grandmother is the teacher!" His attitude changed. He felt proud and participated more. This experience paved the way for other members of the community to share their skills, such as music or chess. These interactions enabled the community to recognize that education is not limited to academic knowledge, but must also encompass each individual's practical and cultural experiences.

A thirst for learning

Through collective effort, the primary school teachers developed their approach, creating a space to reflect on their teaching and experiment with new ways of doing things that encourage creativity and play. The children of Mirantão became passionate about learning, regained self-confidence, and developed their curiosity. Parents, who had long doubted the education system, regained confidence in teachers and became involved in their children's schooling. The school became a place of freedom. Suzana reflected:

"I've started to change. I now try to listen more to the children, to find out what they want. I always ask them what they think, so that they can play a greater role in their own education and apply what they learn at school in their daily lives. This is the purpose of the school and the learning it offers. I feel that it's working for the children, that they're happier. I feel that the teacher-student relationship has changed."

Battling with the administration

One of the outcomes of José Pacheco's visit to Mirantão was that Suzana, Mariana, and Eduardo collaborated with the other teachers and invited parents to form a discussion and action group to support quality education for all. In summer 2017, a group meeting for parents was held at the school, which at the time was taking children only up to age 10. One mother exclaimed, "I don't even want to hear about what happens next year. My son will have to go to school in Mauá, and I

don't want him to have to go to Mauá!" Suzana, who had been brought up in Mirantão, also shared her experience:

"I had been at school in Mirantão for two years when my family moved to a farm in the State of Rio de Janeiro. To continue at the school for the third and fourth years, I had to stay with a lady who lived near it. I spent the week with her and went home on weekends. Doña Neusa was a kind lady who took good care of me, but I missed my mother and it was tough spending six days away from home."

Such significant changes are destabilizing for children. The children from Mirantão were out of their comfort zone in Mauá. Enforced separation resulted in emotional, psychological, and social problems. This is what another mother had to say:

"I have three kids. They need a school here. That is what we are fighting for. My daughter didn't want to go to Mauá. I had to enroll her nonetheless, but now she is seeing a psychologist. She runs away. She has panic attacks. They call me to say that I have to go [to the school] and take her home, but I can't because I'm working [...]. She self-harms. She shies away from company. It isn't only my daughter who is affected; my son suffers seeing his sister like that, and the whole family is affected. That isn't what we want for our family; no one wants to live like that."

Seeing their children so unhappy at the prospect of traveling to Visconde de Mauá for their secondary education, the parents embarked on a long battle with the public administration for the opening of a secondary school in Mirantão. Soon they realized that, by working together, they could wield their collective power far beyond the four walls of the school. Increasingly self-confident, they negotiated with the authorities, engaging with the local education manager and the regional education superintendent.⁵ Mauricio explains:

"We met as a group to boost our motivation and to exchange ideas in pursuit of our goals. Sharing suggestions, thoughts, and feelings gave us the strength to carry on. Speaking with one voice increased our chances of being heard. There was a growing sense of awareness. Those who had become aware helped others to become aware. The evolution was plain to see."

The parents carried out a survey in the village. Results showed that it cost the municipality more to send children to Visconde de Mauá than it would to arrange for them to continue their education in Mirantão. They met with the administration many times, yet their concerns mainly went unaddressed. Battling with an institution that was reluctant to change, the group was sometimes disappointed and discouraged. Although the regional superintendent gave a new secondary school the green light in 2018, the local mayor was still putting up resistance. The

⁵ In Brazil responsibility for teacher recruitment and the purchase of educational materials for both primary and secondary education lies with the local authority. The office of the regional superintendent for education, which is a federal government body, has responsibility for control and coordination, ensuring that public education policy is respected. Local authorities are financed by the federal government.

education secretary at the time decided that proceeding would be premature and postponed the opening until the following year. This caused conflict and tension which tested the parents' resolve, and the group was at risk of splitting. A representative of the administration visited Mirantão to meet the parents. At the meeting, several mothers declared forcefully that the project had their collective backing. This solidarity is what kept the group going.

In 2022, there was renewed optimism following municipal elections and the arrival of Lúcio Benfica as Secretary of Education. Lúcio was a teacher himself and understood what the families were fighting for, so he pushed for a positive response from the municipal administration. Finally, the campaign had succeeded!

The community celebrated its victory. Fellowship and shared joy were central to the transformation process. Every success, however modest, was celebrated, strengthening community solidarity. When the opening of the secondary school in Mirantão was officially announced, after a campaign which had lasted almost five years, a delegation from the International Movement ATD Fourth World was present. The community shared this proud moment with people from Burkina Faso, France, Mexico, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Guatemala. Seeing their parents and the community conduct this campaign opened the eyes of the children to new possibilities and to their power to act.

The new school in Mirantão

The community decided that management of the new secondary school should be the collective responsibility of a group of four, consisting of Mariana, a teacher, an education specialist, and the librarian. A school council was put in place, bringing together five representatives from each group of stakeholders (parents, children, teachers, and members of the community), plus an education specialist and a management representative. New teachers were recruited by the school's educational team, with priority given to candidates who lived nearby and were open to exploring new ways of teaching and learning. At the start of the 2023 academic year, 13 children between the ages of 11 and 15, together with their parents, attended a meeting with the teaching staff and the new education secretary to hear about the ethos and organisation of the new school.

Secondary education in Brazil involves four years of study (from Year 6 to Year 9), but the budget allocated by the mayor would cover only two. Because the class was very small, however, the educational team could be flexible and was able to put in place a collective system allowing pupils to show they had completed the full program of study. Only three children continued to travel each day to Visconde de Mauá.

In 2022, Mirantão primary school was still successfully using the educational methods patiently developed and refined by the discussion and action group that was organized as a result of José Pacheco's visit. When the secondary school opened that year, this step-by-step tested teaching method was rolled out to all classes. Education, the key to the children's future, was now available to all, thanks to the involvement, commitment, and solidarity of the entire community. Each child had the opportunity to shape their learning based on their interests. A great deal of room was left for creativity and autonomy. At the beginning of each semester, children said what they wanted to learn. They were then helped to create a research project for

the semester and were organized into groups based on their chosen topic. These groups were formed to provide a space where children learned to support each other and develop the ability to listen and cooperate. Two adults supported each group: one helping with personal, interpersonal, and emotional aspects, and the other with educational content. The team tailored learning around the children's questions and ensured that formal knowledge from the school curriculum was incorporated into each child's research. From one semester to the next, the children created increasingly ambitious projects. Janaína's story (not her real name) is an excellent example of this approach:

In class, Mariana was supporting a group of three students who wanted to learn about the universe. She started by asking the children what they had learned so far and listened to them explain to her that there is no gravity on the Moon, and what a shooting star is. Janaína then asked: "Can shooting stars be seen from the Moon?" After doing some research, the group couldn't find a definite answer, but didn't give up and used logical reasoning:

"Well, after thinking about it, I don't think shooting stars can be seen from the Moon. Because there's no atmosphere on the Moon, and it's when meteorites enter the atmosphere that they create light. If the Moon has no atmosphere, it won't create light," Janaína explained.

Mariana decided to take these children to the planetarium in Rio. She raised money from the people in the neighborhood to pay for the trip. In front of the entire audience, Janaína asked her question to the specialist who welcomed them on site. The astronomer replied that everything we see from Earth can be seen from the Moon. Disappointed, Mariana encouraged Janaína to talk to the specialist after the conference to understand better and follow through on her logic. After some thought, the researcher looked at the little girl and answered: "No, you're right, I don't think shooting stars can be seen from the Moon."

Another important example is the story of a very shy girl (for privacy reasons, we will call her Betina) who had always been told that she was "an idiot." Mariana shared her story with us:

"When Betina had to research religions around the world, she chose to focus on Chile. She identified the three main religions in Chile, but wondered if there were indigenous peoples in Chile. However, the search engine she used excluded them from the results. This realization unlocked her growing curiosity and a search for more in-depth answers. While the other children continued their school routine, Betina turned her attention to Brazil and immersed herself in the history of colonization. With each discovery, her eyes filled with outrage and questions poured out. Being part of this process, where analysis and knowledge are born, is like being present at the birth of a child; it's magical. Thanks to her discoveries, Betina was able to reexamine the world around her. She can now understand the patterns of oppression that are still present in her family and that prevent her from escaping extreme poverty. Awareness of one's own condition is a fundamental basis for liberation."

For the teaching team, anything that created a spark in children was positive, starting with everyday life and its potential for questioning and wonder. This allowed children to broaden their expectations and nurtured their ability to dream bigger. For example, at a school meeting, students complained that the wait before lunch in the canteen was too long. Mariana explains:

"We asked them why they thought the wait was too long. They said the problem is that there's only one hand-washing tap for all the children. We brainstormed a solution together and asked if anyone could fit a new tap. Suzana fitted it with the help of a child in her class who struggled with counting and memorization. He's come a long way since then. Suzana also learned a lot from doing this with him."

A summary of the benefits brought about by the secondary school project

Social mobilization around the school at Mirantão has had several successes that are worth highlighting:

- **Shared goals have led to a shift in the atmosphere within the school community.** When the process began, the school was marked by frequent conflicts between parents and teachers, among the staff, and between the broader school community and the municipal administration.
- **A shift in the relationship with decision-makers.** Historically, the public administration had adopted a paternalistic approach toward the community, which fostered a culture of complaints and interactions through informal channels. There was no parent or staff representation. The education department failed to monitor the school's daily operations and reacted to complaints by shifting blame onto teachers and staff. The relationship became more balanced, the team became more aware of its rights and responsibilities, dialogue became more collective and a principal was hired.
- **Mirantão now has a secondary school.** This is a significant achievement that should not be underestimated. Over the past two decades, many rural schools have been shut down, and their numbers have been significantly reduced nationwide, in an effort to concentrate students and optimize resources. In a context of weakening educational policies, the establishment of the secondary school in Mirantão stands as a historic victory for rural Brazil.
- **Profound individual and collective shifts in confidence and self-awareness** Children who other schools once rejected, held back for years and labeled as incapable, discovered their intelligence and creativity and felt valued. Others who struggled with anxiety and depression have found new joy in life and look forward to going to school. Teachers who had lost motivation and a sense of purpose are rediscovering their vocation and becoming role models. Parents and grandparents who once felt powerless to support their children and believed their knowledge had no worth shared it proudly and felt recognized.

These significant gains are firmly anchored in the community and paved the way for enduring transformation. But enormous challenges remain.

Opposition to the project

The innovative teaching methods that had been introduced into the secondary school in Mirantão were successfully implemented for many months and gained a broad network of support and solidarity that extended beyond the municipality. Sadly, before long, the new secondary school began to face strong opposition. This was mainly due to the educational innovations, but growing ideological tensions had also begun to divide the country.

Despite the positive changes achieved by the new approach in terms of their children's intellectual and emotional growth, a few of the parents became fearful. They threatened to withdraw their children from the school if it did not return to a more traditional pedagogy. They also called for the dismissal of the management team. By claiming that the new secondary classes in Mirantão would close if their children were no longer enrolled there, they convinced a majority of parents to demand the return of traditional teaching methods. They also used underhanded strategies to shift the city council's support to their side. Faced with the threat of not being re-elected in the next elections, the majority of the municipal council, which had previously supported the new school in Mirantão, decided to replace almost all of the teaching staff. This meant that the new approach to education that the community had supported, has now been abandoned.

These events brought about feelings of exhaustion and defeat in those directly involved, especially as the reversal had sparked great hostility, including personal attacks, deceit, intimidation, and the misuse of public office.

Challenges and unanswered questions

Why did such a reaction occur against a project that had been founded on such strong collective aspirations? The regrettable outcome raises many questions and prompts us to examine what happened more closely. Any effort to change the status quo — especially when it involves entrenched mindsets and attitudes passed down through generations — is bound to encounter strong opposition, which can sometimes be excessive. In the case of Mirantão, several factors come to mind:

- **Local competition for jobs and resources.** In a small community like this, the primary school accounts for a substantial share of employment and resources. Control over these positions is a source of power.
- **Structural inequalities in Brazilian society.** The effects of colonization are still felt today, and the social order continues to be structured by rigid social and racial hierarchies. Such inequalities are locally rooted and manifest themselves in the distribution of land ownership and means of production. For generations, the same social groups have held decision-making power across different levels of government. Small municipalities rely heavily on political alignment with those in power at higher

levels in order to secure funding and even to win elections. Thus, any educational model that challenges the status quo is likely to face strong opposition.

- **A social and political climate increasingly marked by far-right tendencies.** As is happening elsewhere in the world, Brazil is witnessing the resurgence of hateful, discriminatory, and simplistic rhetoric that until recently held little to no legitimacy in public discourse. This reflects a conservative climate that undermines local experience and opposes any efforts to build initiatives based on the knowledge and experiences of marginalized communities, such as indigenous peoples, landless peasants, [Quilombos](#), and others.
- **The inertia or inefficiency of local institutions.** Especially in small municipalities, local institutions serve the private interests of dominant local groups. The 1996 law setting out national education guidelines promotes a quality, democratic, and inclusive education that aims to meet the needs and rights of all. In practice, however, the school system often operates as a mechanism of exclusion, either through the absence of a school, as was once the case in Mirantão, or through the ideological rejection of any autonomy, community participation, or alternative approaches. Educational alternatives remain the privilege of an urban social "elite." It is one of the injustices linked to knowledge that makes it a power issue.⁶

However, we must not allow this setback to overshadow the successes achieved. Here are some specific approaches that enabled those successes and that others may find useful:

- **Attention to personal relationships.** This involves building strong connections with parents, students, teachers, and officials.
- **Supporting the most vulnerable.** Mariana and Eduardo took an early decision to support the teachers who felt attacked by parents and blamed by the administration. They also gave their support to the mothers and grandmothers who felt powerless to contribute. This was the main driving force behind the process and what set the action in motion.
- **Fostering community through engagement and open dialogue.** It is important to establish an environment where everyone feels included, secure to express themselves freely, and appreciated for their input in the shared discussion.
- **Sense of ownership.** The fact that the process was led by active members of the community and was about issues that concerned them — their children's education, their rights, their jobs — was crucial.

⁶ For further information, see the research in social philosophy conducted through a cross-disciplinary approach by ATD Fourth World, particularly the section on knowledge-related injustices in François Jomini, David Jousset, *et al.*, *Pour une nouvelle philosophie sociale. Transformer la société à partir des plus pauvres* (For a New Social Philosophy: Transforming Society with People Experiencing Extreme Poverty), Bordeaux, Le Bord de l'eau, coll, "Documents" 2024

- **Perseverance and consistency.** It is important to keep going and not give up despite the difficulties and time needed to achieve significant change. Agents of change must surround themselves with people, join networks, and seek out individuals who can act as intermediaries.
- **A thirst for knowledge and learning.** For many in this particular community, recognizing the value of education and self-awareness has been crucial in driving change.
- **Develop networks and alliances.** Reaching out for support locally, nationally, and internationally is essential to ensure lasting impact, gain new insights, strengthen expertise, boost visibility, and make change resilient and sustainable.
- **Creativity.** It is essential not to limit oneself to preconceived models or established forms of action. Innovation is crucial.

While there are no ready-made solutions, it is important to make use of our shared struggles in order to keep on exploring how to create fairer communities. So let us take inspiration from Mariana and Eduardo's story as we work to transform the future of children in situations of exclusion and ensure that no potential is lost.