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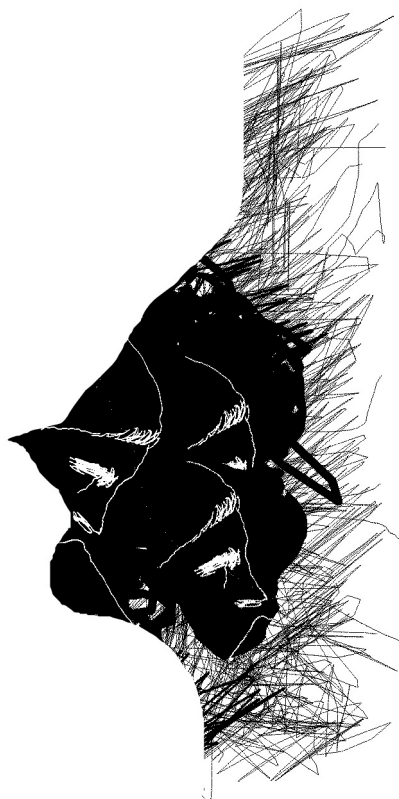
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Interview



Sérgio Niza: a brave Portuguese pedagogue

Julio Groppa Aquino¹

Abstract

This topic's interview is primarily aimed at providing the Brazilian public with substantial information and reflection about Movimento da Escola Moderna – a Portuguese association for cooperatively organized teacher self-training on all school levels, operating across the Portuguese territory since the mid-1970's. An interview was therefore conducted with Sérgio Niza, founder and head at the Centro de Formação de Professores and at Escola Moderna, a journal, both of which are connected to *Movimento da Escola Moderna*. The editorial work was done by Julio Groppa Aquino, an associate professor at Faculdade de Educação da Universidade de São Paulo. Through the in loco dialogue between interviewer and interviewee in September 2012, a sort of historic record comes forth, along with a critical-analytical one, about questions that have been essential to school practice since the return of democracy in Portugal in the 1970s and that seem to match in so many aspects the Brazilian situation and its peculiar inflections. With Movimento da Escola Moderna as the core subject of the interview, Sérgio Niza brings up the proposal of creating spaces for collective training management focused on theoretical-practical reflection about the pedagogic everyday life, offering also a sharp evaluation of the Portuguese education in the last few decades. Moreover, the interview brings us a timely reflection on Escola da Ponte (the Portuguese experience that is best known among Brazilians), as well as lucid considerations about contemporary Brazil, exhorting it to “go much further” in education.

Keywords

Portuguese pedagogy – Movimento da Escola Moderna – Teaching – In-service teacher training.

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Sérgio Niza: um aguerrido pedagogo português

Julio Groppa Aquino¹

Resumo

A entrevista em pauta tem o objetivo principal de dar a conhecer ao público brasileiro informações e reflexões substanciais acerca do Movimento da Escola Moderna – associação portuguesa de autoformação cooperada de professores de todos os graus de ensino, operante em todo o território português desde meados da década de 1970. Para tanto, foi colhido o depoimento de Sérgio Niza, fundador e diretor do Centro de Formação de Professores e da revista Escola Moderna, ambos ligados ao referido Movimento. Os trabalhos editoriais ficaram a cargo do Professor Julio Groppa Aquino, da Faculdade de Educação da Universidade de São Paulo. Por meio do diálogo estabelecido in loco entre entrevistador e entrevistado em setembro de 2012, desponta uma espécie de registro histórico e, ao mesmo tempo, analítico-crítico das questões fulcrais que rondam as práticas escolares desde o retorno da democracia em Portugal, na década de 1970, e que em tantos pontos parecem coincidir com a conjuntura brasileira e suas inflexões características. Tendo o Movimento da Escola Moderna como núcleo temático da entrevista, Sérgio Niza traz à baila a proposta da criação de espaços de gestão coletivo-formativa centrados na reflexão teórico-prática acerca do cotidiano pedagógico, além de oferecer uma apurada avaliação da educação portuguesa nas últimas décadas. Inclui-se, ainda, uma reflexão oportuna sobre a Escola da Ponte (a experiência lusitana mais conhecida entre os brasileiros), assim como lúcidas ponderações sobre o Brasil contemporâneo, conclamando este a “ir muito mais longe” no quesito educacional.

Palavras-chave

Pedagogia portuguesa – Movimento da Escola Moderna – Profissão docente – Formação docente em serviço.

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Introduction



Reputed by António Nóvoa (2012, p.17) as “the most consistent, coherent, inspiring presence in the Portuguese pedagogy in the last 50 years”, Sérgio Niza is an exponent in Portugal’s contemporary educational thought, having worked long and tirelessly in the field of teacher training in his country. Besides managing the Centro de Formação de Professores and a journal, *Escola Moderna*, both of which are connected to *Movimento da Escola Moderna*, he is also a member of Portugal’s Conselho Nacional de Educação.

In July 2012, his writings were selected and compiled in *Sérgio Niza: escritos sobre educação*, published by editora Tinta-da-China. Organized by António Nóvoa, Francisco Marcelino and Jorge Ramos do Ó, the book brings to light, in over 700 pages, 112 texts composed by Niza from 1965 to 2010. A remarkable collection of his ideas, the book is, above all, the testimony of a lifetime devoted to the hard, perhaps Herculean, art of repositioning the educational mentality in Portugal, which seems to match in so many ways the mentality in Brazil. Certainly, a work of the highest ethical-political relevance for both countries.

Born in 1940 near Portugal’s southern border with Spain, Sérgio is a remarkably educated, smart, and friendly man. His slow-paced speech, contrasting with the sharpness of his viewpoints, makes the interview he gave us in Lisbon in September 2012 a kind of historical record, as well as a critical-analytical one, about the essential questions that have surrounded school practice since the later half of the 20th century and that still persist, to the considerable astonishment of those involved.

As he evaluates the four decades following the Carnation Revolution through which Portugal resumed the democratic path, Sérgio Niza points out the macro-historical achievements occurring in education, but he also recognizes that a refractory school selectivity has remained and is expressed in the low effectiveness of the learning taking place therein. Even considering it is a cultural change process that takes time to completion, the feeling of insufficiency is unavoidable for contemporaries.

How then should we face such state of things? The Portuguese pedagogue bets on a precise alternative: let teachers, as the key protagonists of the intricate school ingenuity, be the ones to form alternative paths through the public sharing of what they are already doing and thinking but are so afraid to take possession of in the sphere of consciousness.

In other words, it is in the space of collective training management, focused on theoretical-practical reflection about the pedagogic everyday life that the school could possibly bring out everything that paradoxically already inhabits it, so that form and flow can then be given for a more powerful, aggrandizing transformation of the existences therein.

The guidelines of Sérgio Niza’s ideas could be summarized as follows:

The community of practices is therefore the social context where learning takes place through the exchanges that guarantee progress at work. [...] It is only from an outright socialization in the

cultural uses of teaching that it will be possible to trigger the processes to leave behind the spontaneous learning acquired from teachers in their experiences of how their own teachers used to teach them when they were still students, so that they can instead move on towards a creative, sustained renovation in the professional culture. The urgent, inevitable renovation in teachers' professional culture will necessarily imply a *work of mourning* over the social and cultural past of the profession that is now solidified in each teacher's identity. Building cultural alternatives for the profession may constitute a relevant mission for the communities of practices. Teachers' participation in the social activities of the communities of practices takes place, of course, through structures of cooperative organization of the learning work (NÓVOA; Ó; MARCELINO, 2012, p. 600-601)

A leading figure in *Movimento da Escola Moderna* (MEM), which, again according to Nóvoa, constitutes the single most relevant Portuguese pedagogical movement, Niza offers, in the interview below, a series of clarifications about this movement, its *modus faciendi*, achievements, and also limits.

An in-service teacher training experience that is unprecedented for us Brazilians, MEM is broadly defined as an association for cooperatively organized teacher self-training on all school levels (from early childhood to higher education) organized in regional centers that operate across the Portuguese territory, which is divided in 14 regions. At these centers, members meet on a regular basis to share and reflect on their day-to-day pedagogical practices and then produce knowledge and didactic-pedagogical resources integrated with their cooperatively organized self-teaching projects that are conducted in *Grupos de Trabalho Cooperativo* [Cooperative Work Groups].

At the association's website (<http://www.movimentoescolamoderna.pt>), the principles

guiding the works conducted therein are shown. A set of guidelines of unquestionable relevance for educational work, regardless of the conditions it might be performed in. A set of expressly democratic values that would constitute teachers' concrete actions. Namely:

- pedagogical means convey in themselves the democratic ends of education;
- school activity is developed in the context of a social, educational contract;
- the democratic practices of organization that are shared by all members are instituted in the Conselho de Cooperação Educativa [Educational Cooperation Council];
- school work processes reproduce authentic social processes;
- information is shared through regular communication circuits;
- school practices shall give immediate social meaning to students' learning;
- students intervene in, or question, the social environment, and include community *actors* into classes as a source of knowledge in their projects.

It is also worth highlighting the journal *Escola Moderna*, headed by Sérgio Niza. A vehicle for the dissemination of the thought and actions that are produced within *Movimento da Escola Moderna's* practices, the journal operates since 1974, having now reached its 44th issue. Besides its immediate interest, *Escola Moderna* (Sérgio would rather call it *Escola Contemporânea*, as seen later in this interview) is also an archive-heritage of what has been thought and done in Portuguese education over the last few decades. Parenthetically, it is worth reading the article by Francisco Marcelino (2009) with an evaluation of the journal's activities.

Just to provide a general idea of *Movimento da Escola Moderna's* historical relevance, and particularly of Niza's theoretical contributions spread through *Escola Moderna*, the Portuguese pedagogue's production has been the subject of three tens of theses and dissertations submitted to the Universities of London, Boston, Illinois, and Brown University, as well as Universidades de Salamanca, de

Lisboa, do Porto, do Minho, de Trás-os-Montes, dos Açores, da Madeira, Universidade Católica de Lisboa, Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa, and Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada. Likewise, Sérgio Niza has an entry dedicated to himself in the French collection *Pédagogues contemporains* (1996), under the supervision of Jean Houssaye.

Niza is no doubt a brave defender of pedagogy and, particularly, of public education. His critical vitality is beyond dispute. An evidence of this is the fact that, in a conference named *Sérgio Niza, a pedagogue and a citizen*, held last April at Universidade de Évora in honor of the pedagogue, he said:

It's necessary to rescue pedagogy, and for this I'm here. Because we were wrong when we thought it was worthless. And by rescuing pedagogy, pedagogues will return. Not the hawkers, not the pseudo-pedagogues – a sort of pedagogy of business or a pedagogy of being for profit

that's beginning to invade public schools, since the private ones are their own already, and that's now deceitfully turning these businessmen into a kind of educator of the people, promoters of inclusion. How long will we put up with this? (NIZA, 2013)

Following largely the course of his life story, the interview – a rather long one, which, for editorial reasons, is condensed here – begins with a biographical retrospective marked by Niza's strong feeling for the idea of freedom, his outright opposition to the dictatorial environment of his youth, and the first few years of his work, including a curious passage through May 1968 in France.

Moreover, Sérgio Niza offers a sharp evaluation of the Portuguese Education after 1974, and a timely reflection on Escola da Ponte (the Portuguese experience that is best known among Brazilians), as well as lucid considerations about contemporary Brazil, exhorting it to “go much further” in education.

Interview

I'll begin by asking you to tell us a little about your professional trajectory, particularly the creation of *Movimento da Escola Moderna* in Portugal.

In the 1960's I began to work as an elementary school teacher, with some surprise and expectation about myself, as probably the last thing among my choices for life would be to become a teacher. I had this idea about the teacher job that they had to repeat things a lot. And that repetitive side of life was a dreadful thing to me.

We are talking about the height of Salazar dictatorship, right?

Yes. How we were totally convinced of being constantly watched – not only a conviction; it was something you interiorized, it was part of your identity –, all that atmosphere was probably the most serious thing about the dictatorship. But what I used to think was that teachers were limited to repeating. And I had a big intellectual curiosity, whether for literature or painting, or even music. Because I'm from a family of musicians. My grandfather had a chamber orchestra, and everyone in my family learned to play an instrument. Therefore, there was this rather cultural environment around me. And that didn't seem to be what teachers did. And I wanted this creative side, participating in culture itself, and in knowledge, etc. There was a point when I wanted to be a writer, and I romantically imagined I could endure the loneliness of writing. Later, there was a period when I wanted to take action, work with cultural things, etc. And so, in that period, I decided to go to Évora to train as a teacher, a little bit against my family's expectations. It was only later that I got a master's degree in psychology of education and also in education investigation.

What was your basic education?

I went to a school in Estremoz. And I was educated there. From Estremoz I went to Liceu Francês, where I was preparing to enter the Faculty of Letters. I had an accident: I fell from the streetcar. And the doctor thought I should have an interruption period so they could test whether anything had happened to my brain because of the fall. It was the 1960's, things were slow. And it was during this period, when I returned to my family's place in Alentejo, that I felt more and more like going into action, accomplishing things, going to work as quickly as possible.

How old were you when you started to teach?

Twenty-three. But the work to start an organization of teachers was made in February 1965. The school was very formal and all you could study were the pedagogues that were previously selected; there were the censored ones. The Portuguese dictatorship was extremely cautious about teachers, particularly elementary teachers, because they were thought to be able to cause major damages in the political sphere. There was a huge surveillance, both on students and teachers.

And how was your entry into teaching?

I became a teacher in 1963. My first class was one of boys in the second year, very young ones. But I immediately organized a school municipality, inspired by the model described by António Sérgio, following the experiences of *self government* particularly in American schools and in a few English schools. The following year I wasn't admitted as a teacher. The Conselho de Ministros was taking measures about public employees who allegedly didn't support the State, and I was expelled as a public employee for having ideas that were against the maintenance of the State. Then I had to return to Lisbon, and I looked for Rui Grácio, a great Portuguese pedagogue who had taught me philosophy at Liceu Francês

and was working at the Centro de Investigação Pedagógica da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian. And he invited me to work with him. But it was really tiring spending hours and hours in that work of analyzing questionnaires; what I really wanted was to be in touch with people. And so I went, as a teacher, to Colégio Moderno, of Mário Soares' family. After just a few months, I had to apply for this certificate that allowed me to teach in private schools. And so the political police realized I was at Colégio Moderno, and they went down there to say I was forbidden to teach. Meaning, by then, that I was forbidden to teach, whether in public or private schools. But I kept attending the refresher courses at the Sindicato Nacional de Professores (*National Union of Teachers*). Rui Grácio started those in 1963. And I participated in the 1964, 1965 and 1966 versions, with him. In February 1965, I invited a small group of teachers to start a collective work process. The first text in my latest book, a text from 1965, is the account of that work at the union. The goals that were set for this group are virtually the same that were later being pursued when we named the group, which got bigger and bigger, *Movimento da Escola Moderna*.

They remain until today?

Yes, the general guidelines are almost the same: the possibility for teachers to train one another, by talking and showing texts, their practices, analyzing students' works, reporting what they're doing. And studying, reading texts, discussing, etc. These dimensions have remained until today as the genetic references that founded the *Movimento*.

And then? Where did you go?

In this group there was a teacher, Isabel Pereira, from Centro Infantil Helen Keller, an institution for blind children. She thought there would be no problem if I went there, because it was a private institution, but also a medical-

assistive one, and the political police wouldn't be interested in that. At this Center they had introduced the Freinet techniques. And to me that was amazing too, because Freinet founded his work on an organization much like the production and services cooperatives, just like António Sérgio did, who was a great advocate of cooperatives. And Freinet had helped creating three tens of rural cooperatives. So he was a cooperative activist who followed the movement of school cooperatives that was led by Profit. He then transferred this organization structure with its rules of participating and deciding through meetings, through voting, into his pedagogical practice. Things were really exciting at Helen Keller. However, I got a scholarship to go to Paris. In December 1966 I went, as a scholarship student supported by Fundação Gulbenkian, to Instituto Pedagógico Nacional, which later became *Centre National de Recherche Pédagogique* (CNRP). And, during that period, there was May '68. I was there. And I had to stay, changing my work projects.

I'd really like to hear a little more about that moment.

We'd spend the day at Sorbonne, discussing, as they say in France, with the sage, with Jean Rostand, Jean Paul Sartre, etc. It was a really beautiful thing, it was fantastic. At some point, Sartre ends a session saying, "Well, I have to go now, because from this point on I'll begin to just talk nonsense". For us, Sartre was a hero, and seeing him bear himself like that in public, it was fantastic for us in our youth. I remember Jean Rostand with his white beard; he looked like a 19th century aristocrat. But he was a very important man in biology and he spoke as if writing the best French in the world. It was amazing to hear him, as if you were reading magnificent French – something Sartre lacked, he wasn't so careful about his speech. We'd see wonderful Argentine films, documentaries from Central America, things we didn't suspect that could exist. It was a whole life in constant

creation, the liveliest curiosity. Wonderful things, music, theater. It was really, really interesting. I became close to many teachers precisely from São Paulo who were arriving in Paris, some out of curiosity, others because of the dictatorship.

And how did you get closer to the French MEM specifically?

In 1966 I went with Rosalina Gomes de Almeida to the Congresso da Escola Moderna in Perpignan, France, with the purpose of meeting Freinet. But that happened to be the first year Freinet wasn't coming to the Congress because he was very ill. And he dies that same year, a few months later.

So you never met Freinet in person?

I never did. We were there as observers, because during the dictatorship we wouldn't be allowed to belong to the international MEM. Those things weren't possible in Portugal. We stayed there as observers, with some connection to them, figuring this would ensure us some measure of protection abroad. If anything happened to us, we'd have people to defend us out of Portugal, there would be some sympathy, etc. Also, it was an incentive for us to develop our work. We continued attending, but we were never, as they'd put it, very *freinetic*. The connection with the French MEM was mostly through the fact that it was possible for teachers to organize themselves, gain some power of their own, train one another, reflect and have their practices developed. This was therefore the initial idea that was kept, while Freinet's expectation was the opposite. What Freinet wanted was to create a set of techniques that enhanced and improved the school. So he kept gathering techniques that were already known – the press working at the school had been used in Germany; the class report wall displays, in the Russian Revolution, etc. So what he did was select those techniques and make a good synthesis of them, which he kept during his

first creative phase, between the two world wars. He was a man of the Escola Nova. Then there was a big dissent with the communists; he belonged to the communist party. Before the Second World War, the group in charge of the educational project at *Front Populaire* was led by Langevin and Wallon. They made the great document for changing the school model. They all had college degrees. Now the elementary teachers didn't have a major role at the Liga da Educação Nova. After France's liberation, Freinet realized they were being treated as mere practitioners and therefore had no power, were not heard. He was really mad and broke up with the French group of Educação Nova. Then he finally named his group *Movimento da Escola Moderna*. And what's the foundation? To him, Escola Nova had become scholastic – that was the word he used –, it had grown formal, lost its novelty, its dynamic character. It was a second traditional school. And what he wants, which is beautiful, is to bring Escola Nova's most interesting, valuable things into the school of the people. What the bourgeoisie designed for their Escola Nova were very good things. So now it was a matter of transferring them into the school of the people, of breaking up with Escola Nova – which was the modern school in the historical sense – and creating an alternative answer. Now, he called it *modern*, because it was more understandable to call it *modern*, yet still with Enlightenment-inspired ideas. For the first time in history, as he used to say, a movement from the base up, and a new popular pedagogy. In other words, it was about teachers themselves – and what's more, primary teachers, of humble background – getting together and taking ownership, taking possession of their own instruments of work and thus trying to improve their profession and the school.

Is that the same spirit of the Portuguese MEM?

In a way, yes. That's what seems most interesting to me about the *Movimento*. It's

these two fundamental ideas: organization by teachers themselves and the fact that we're going to use what's best in culture and give it a meaning, but one that can come from the school. In the end, as far as I'm concerned, that's all that connects me to Freinet. All I'm saying is that, in Portugal, we actually stress the need for teachers to work with one another. Especially from a political point of view, that was contrary to the historical moment, but it was vital for teachers to gain some assurance, even on the emotional level so they wouldn't be so desperate. That was the State's idea: separating them completely, not letting them meet, not letting them be together. So for us it was about emphasizing practice, thinking about and improving it by talking about it. And then, I for one had some big surprises. Because I didn't imagine how hard it is for teachers to talk about their practice, and even harder to move from talking about the profession to writing about it.

So, the *Movimento* led by you is an association that expressly emphasizes training, with no party or union foundations nor government connections?

We've always wanted independence from large institutions of power, yet keeping very active bridges, because it wouldn't be possible otherwise. We had a few union leaders at *Movimento*. But we've managed to keep on dialoguing and respecting each other and, above all, learning to understand that the *Movimento's* rules couldn't resemble those of a party or a union. People had to work, and our talking sprang from working to consolidate citizenship and political consciousness.

What happens to the *Movement* after the dictatorship ended in 1974?

In the first few years in the 1970's we were still very close to Freinet. We were using the whole panoply of Freinet's techniques to influence our work and to be able to continue

working and talking about it. Because talking about what one does is so hard that it's in itself highly transforming and educative. Roughly speaking, anywhere in the world today, teachers are still afraid to talk about what they do, and they don't even learn to talk about what they do. And it's surprising that they've never learned! It's like having to go back and name things that every teacher knows. Because they all go through them, even if it's been with their teachers. And one sure thing is that teachers aren't capable of naming those things. We used to say, in a slightly simplistic way: first we have to rebuild names that are already given to things and that people store in the unconscious as if they didn't have names. It's as though the teacher could not describe the sequence of an action he performs with students, because he forgets or thinks it's irrelevant.

Because it's so automatic?

It's astounding. First, it's necessary to recover this, almost like someone in psychoanalysis, so to speak. But it's true that it has an identical power. And it does cause an identical kind of resistance. Then, it's necessary to find names for things we don't know how to say. And this we find in theoretical writings, in pedagogues, in philosophers, etc. So since the beginning, we were always reading these texts to one another and discussing them.

After Freinet, what other theoretical intersections appeared along the way?

In 1977, I had published two books at Editorial Estampa by Russian psychologists from the Moscow school: Leontiev, Luria, Vygotsky, etc. I did it to show my colleagues that there was that other point of view of other pedagogues and psychologists. None of their writings existed here in Portugal. I did two things in two collections at Estampa. One was dedicated to education techniques and the other to pedagogical sciences. In the first one,

I sought things that were closer to techniques and strategies but not normative didactics. And I started to publish the works of Freinet. The essential thing was to disseminate Freinet so we wouldn't have the feeling that only a few of us had his secret. Freinet was not ours only. That was an idea that seemed crucial to me, even for us to dialogue more freely and not be the trustees of his heritage. That gave our study more freedom. I also wanted us to tread through other viewpoints in order to help people jump off the pedagogy-centered view that was child-focused to a society-centered view. In other words, learning is social, it is done with others, in the interaction with others. So that leap begins to take place more systematically within the *Movimento* in the period from late 1970's to early 1980's. And we started studying David Olson, Jerome Bruner, the post-vygotskians that I also tried to spread. Therefore, a leap towards a viewpoint closer to cultural psychology and pedagogy with a stronger sociocultural, historic-cultural tone, or, as it's now suggested in Brazil, a social-historic-cultural viewpoint. Therefore, the leap was about denouncing the traditional, teacher-centered school, not accepting as good enough the heritage of Escola Nova, with its child-centered pedagogy, but benefiting from all the investigations with stronger anthropological, cultural tones, from social learning, in that wide range of investigators. One of the authors we read a lot was Gordon Wells, with his connecting Vygotsky to Halliday's linguistic proposals which are very inspiring.

A particular topic I'd like you to comment on is Escola da Ponte. I'm asking you this because it's the Portuguese pedagogical experience that is best known among Brazilians

Escola da Ponte kept closely in touch with many things that are from Escola Nova, even in its own structure, in the large students meetings, with students' works highly individualized – an almost individual learning. It's true that,

at some points along the way, it calls out for the teacher, or classmate groups are created in order to move on. But it was as though the normal course were centered on each student, then they'd gather in common necessity groups, like the level groups, and eventually in large formal meetings, where real communication was impossible. José Pacheco [former head of Escola da Ponte] has gone as far as to have a sort of justice body. Meaning that, at their meetings, students could judge behaviors. I think he later corrected and improved some of these proceedings. But it's hard to keep track of Escola da Ponte's pedagogical culture, since it's not described or theorized by the teachers.

Do you know Escola da Ponte?

I've never been there. Because one thing that's always seemed strange to me is José Pacheco's view that instead of his explaining us what went on at Escola da Ponte, we should go there. So to me it seemed dangerous that he should fail to advance into theorizing on Escola da Ponte's practices. I found it dangerous to his work, because there'd be no possibility of repeating it later in another school, to expand it. It would be shut in there. The other point that seemed dangerous to me was that he might believe that whoever went to see it would see his Escola da Ponte. And a very traditional teacher will interpret Escola da Ponte as traditionally as he could possibly want to; he'll never realize what Pacheco wanted with Escola da Ponte. His charismatic leadership towered compared to the whole of the team. It's not something he's to blame for, but probably there wasn't a deep enough reflection to see that not only would all this stop Escola da Ponte from continuing like when he created it, but it made it hard for that dream to be resumed by other people. Later, as he expanded the work methodology into very discipline-oriented cycles, and he couldn't step up to run the school and had to delegate to someone else, it seems that all this wasn't

worked on sufficiently. I think that, despite my deep respect for him, he should have reflected about how far Escola da Ponte as an organization dear to him could be transferred into other teaching cycles, and at what point it became impossible to keep the organization's frame and original values. Since he is now in Brazil, Escola da Ponte is definitely no longer the Escola da Ponte he created; it's something else. But, as I said, I've never been to Escola da Ponte. But I have a deep respect for the teachers there. Because of their courage and resolve, although in another school.

Were the teachers there connected to MEM?

After José Pacheco left to Brazil, Escola da Ponte asked their teachers to seek training at MEM. And we agreed, we were available. Our working place is Faculdade de Psicologia e Ciências da Educação da Universidade do Porto; they lend us the places and that's where we have our Saturday meetings. And they started this work with us. But I hear the regional administration authorities weren't happy about their being connected to the *Movimento*. It was complicated because, if they have a work structure model that's quite formalized and prestigious to a certain public, it's hard to leap over to another pedagogical conception. All in all, our doors are still open to them, as to anyone who wants to think critically with us about pedagogical work.

Bud they eventually didn't stay at MEM?

No. Had they looked deeper into their work model, they'd find out they kept attached to a sort of paedocentrism that's focused on children's individual curriculum plans, which counters a strong cooperative-driven dimension of mutual help that founds our practices in the learning communities.

So can I conclude that the work performed there follows a conservative model after all?

I won't accept calling it conservative. In terms of the historical evolution of pedagogy, we could say they are more connected to Escola Nova's paedocentric approach. And at MEM we tried, through critical analysis, to break not only with the traditional school, with the school's grammar, but also with the way the organization of learning is centered in Escola Nova. We want a contemporary school. We created the name *Movimento da Escola Moderna* with the initial mistake that Freinet himself had made. But that's all the more reason why our association should be called *Movimento da Escola Contemporânea*. Only these things aren't made just because you want them so. This modern school means contemporary school to us: it's not the 19th century modern school.

What about the specific actions of MEM, how is it financially supported?

It's us. Each member has a quota that is paid semi-annually or yearly. And we have an annual congress that helps us financially.

Any external support?

We get a single support from the State. All the training we do is free. And, in exchange, the State assigns two teachers to help us with the training organization, as it does with teachers' associations, such as the Portuguese or Math ones. We have groups of teachers in each of the country's 14 regions. The important thing, though, is the internal training at MEM, or "cooperatively organized teacher self-training", as we call it. It is done in cooperative work groups sorted by common interests in research, practice analysis and written production in these groups.

Does it cover the whole territory?

Yes, including the islands, i.e., Azores and Madeira. In each of these regions, three-

hour meetings are held once a month on Saturdays, usually in the morning, and open to anyone. The program conducted over the year can also work, for those who need and enroll in it, as a credit-awarding training, meaning that it can award you credits. And it can be freely attended by anyone interested. Each meeting has an hour and a half of more theoretical issues where we'll go deeper into one of the modules or one of the areas on which what we call the model's syntax is grounded: working through projects; collective work in dialogical research; self-study time at classroom, guided by an individual plan; and co-participation in organizing the curricular work in an educational cooperation board.

And these topics are common to the country's different regions?

No. It has to be concerning those areas. In the region, they choose and invite people in the *Movimento* from some other or their own region to address these topics. We have an Online Resource Center with many research and theoretical texts that may be printed and used for reading and debating in that hour-and-a-half theoretical section, as though in a seminar. Then, on the next hour and a half, it's like working on case studies. To us, that's the most important section, and we call it "practice accounts": we present the practices we've performed, illustrating them, bringing works made by students themselves to show the others. In that second section, the educators are in one room, first or secondary cycle teachers in another one, and teachers of disciplines, whether from the first or secondary cycle, are together, because, ultimately, we're not exactly talking didactics. We're talking about curriculum management, how students work, their production, etc. Three rooms working simultaneously. Practices are shown and then there's a debate about these practices. That's the kind of training action we perform since the early 1960's. But we conduct many other types

of training in workshops, seminars, internships, and projects of research and pedagogical in-depth studies.

And do you participate in this training?

Yes, I do.

Here in Lisbon?

And around the country.

And do you lead the Lisbon region?

No, I'm not in the leadership. As soon as I could, I withdrew from the leadership to give as many fellow members as possible the opportunity to rotatively coordinate MEM's works from the body that is the pedagogical coordination board. I remember that the last time I was at the board, it was hard both for me and the *Movimento*. It was in the early 1990s, during a Socialist Party administration. A few people in the government were strongly connected to MEM and they started to invite people from the *Movimento* to a few positions. Since it was predictable that the Socialist Party would win the elections, I reminded people at the MEM Congress, before those elections, about what had happened in France and Spain: in France, when Mitterrand won, he financed the French *Movimento* and captivated some of its teachers into the French Socialist Party's education. And thus, he destroyed the French MEM somehow.

What about Spain?

When the party – the PSOE – won the elections in Spain, they called in the groups of teachers, teacher associations under several designations, of several ideologies, etc. In Barcelona, they held a meeting and proposed to finance those associations and groups. They called them Grupos de Renovação Pedagógica (Pedagogical Renovation Groups), which then

became the Grupos de Renovação. And they had a lot of money. And since they had a lot of money, they were now inviting people to give conferences, and they lost the initiative and their identity. It was therefore essential at that point to know how to fight the temptations of power so we wouldn't lose our work direction, our autonomy and our efforts of critical reflection and active citizenship.

If possible, I'd like you to take stock of the history of the last few decades in Portugal's education.

After nearly 40 years now since the April 25, we must recognize that, in the face of the huge tardiness in the Portuguese people's right to school, the achievements have been spectacular. Now, the right to succeed in school learning hasn't been achieved to the necessary extent; school remains selective. So you're left with a feeling of longing. How come we weren't able to move further with the huge means we had, particularly after we joined the European Union, and with all the money that rolled in for education?

We wanted things to move faster, but I'm fully aware that a change in culture is like changing the skin, it's a body change, a mind change, a change in everything. And this takes decades, centuries even. After having worked so hard and with all the funding, how come we advanced so little in what is essential in school? I always say this in my writings, and I won't get tired of saying it: what is essential in school – the adoption of the Simultaneous Method, i.e., teaching many as though just one – is the same since the 17th century. Because this takes visible shape in the 17th century, followed by the decisive importance of massive schooling in the 19th century, after the bourgeoisie takes over power. And even because of a contradiction: how come the bourgeoisie, who wanted an excellent school of unsurpassable quality for their children, accepted so quickly, in their business-minded way, that what was essential for their

children after all was the social capital? How come they accepted that placing their children with those of their peers, the rich, was more valuable for the continuity of their businesses and assets than an actually different school? That's also astounding, because those people who had the economic power, who thought initially that they had to have a special, fancy school, would later think that the school, the way it was, was fine because they have enough money to attach to the curriculum what's like their social group – for instance, if it's riding horses, then riding it is; if it's the piano, the piano it is, etc. Things that don't exist in the school but they can have. And if they want to improve skills in one subject, they'll buy another teacher's work to come over their place. But giving up the advance of school is a mistake for the capitalists, who will pay dearly for it in a near future, because the school is actually worn out and because school knowledge is taking in more and more labor, all the labor, even their children's labor. So there are things for which the school has become essential, yet obsolete. And it must by all means transform itself and improve so they can also be richer. Look at the contradiction and the cultural wretchedness of it. It's not even necessary to stress what we have to stress, which is the central role of culture, of creativity, etc. But it's necessary to change so that their children, like everyone else's, will cope with school so it may be immediately useful, not only to the progress of economy, but to social progress, because social-economic development depends on human development, which only the best education can ensure.

A structural contradiction, therefore?

Yes. Look at Sweden's lesson as they reinforced the traditions of the old schools of always. Sweden's results at PISA decreased only with the right-wing administration. That is, the conservative government revalued the traditional attitude and work of teachers, like it's happening with the right-wing alliance in

Portugal. In Sweden, with teachers being more watched and controlled, it wasn't possible to achieve better results. On the contrary. All I mean is that the nature of school, i.e., school's own historical nature creates this impoverishment in the school. And, unfortunately, that impoverishment of work within the school has so far been kept in its most visible form in right wing administrations, but it persists in a more hidden form throughout time, and resists change. It's happened in Portugal, like in most countries. And there's something else which sounds unreal, but it does happen: nothing truly important has ever been done to educate children in schools for democratic citizenship. Nothing ever happens that causes children to experience this dimension of solidarity, cooperation, democratic sharing, of building and changing rules, of understanding what the democratic values are in daily life. I'm not talking about the liberal democratic regimes, but the values that constitute democracy and have allowed human rights to appear. That's unthinkable: how come that, with all the conditions in place for this to happen, it didn't? People say that, with the fear of resembling anything that went on during the dictatorship, that it was the ideologization imposed on students. But that's not enough to explain what happened. That is, the Socialist Party is much to blame, because it ruled for a long time without betting, as it should have, on educating for democratic life in the day-to-day relations between citizens.

But why do we miss something that's never actually existed in the history of school?

I stand in the field of the possible. I've worked as a teacher, and I work with hundreds of teachers who work with their students, managing the curriculum in a shared way, discussing what they're going to do, producing works and spreading them, discussing things that go badly when people feel someone is doing harm to someone else. And we analyze that, we

talk about that. And they find solutions, as long as they're not punishment solutions, but rather making explicit, clarifying what's happening, and whether it has a reason for being. And new ways for tensions and the cultural work are sought. Because this happens to a few teachers and a few classes, and even to one or two schools in Portugal, I know it's possible. Otherwise it couldn't have happened to us.

And isn't it always through exception that we think about school? I apologize for cornering you.

I've always been afraid of saying: *I want all schools to function, in a certain time, like we do*. I couldn't do that, because it would be against my ethics. The only thing I can say is: *you can do it in another way, because there are people who do it in another way*. I don't aspire for a government to exist that says: *let's all do Escola Moderna*. Because at that point, I'd have to kill myself. I can't stand the idea of any political totalitarianism, and education is the heart of the *polis* – our greatest good, according to Socrates. It's urgent that new, diverse pedagogical cultures, in a diligent dialogue, cause education and human development to advance.

Well then, finally, I'd like to know your impressions about the Brazilian education.

I'm from a very small country, so I lose myself in the cultural immensity of your country. I used to assume Brazilians to be much more connected to the USA. And they're not. Those are things you must go to Brazil to realize. Because there's this illusion in Europe about the US power over Central and South America. And it's not that much, and much less with the people. Brazilians in general have no identification with North America. That's more like the elites. But in education organizations, there's a strong mark of that connection. For instance, the idea that the

private schools are the good ones, because they give prestige, while the others, the public schools, are for the people, for the poor. This division's what strikes me, because even a low middle-class person is willing to strive and have several jobs to have a child in a private school to ensure him social promotion.

In your evaluation, would we have, to some extent, put aside the collective fight for valuing the public school?

I even feel, perhaps unjustly, a certain desistance. It's like something made natural. Municipalities have schools for those who are not going to private ones. That effort of public schools is really centralized in federal and municipal governments, probably with some very interesting people, but, as it always happens, these are cadres who spend many years in those advisory positions. And that permanence settles people down. I found their efforts very interesting. The State of São Paulo, which is so rich, is making a huge effort now, but it standardizes materials, standardizing also the teachers. I know that such culturally distinguished people as education ministers and secretaries are somewhat suspicious about the level and quality of their teachers' training. I believe it's this suspicion, which you'll also find in Europe, what centralizes pedagogy itself and standardizes guidelines to do the same things at the same time. I'm saying it very respectfully, but I think Brazil, being as huge a country as it is, and rich as it is, it has the resources I hope Brazil's administrations will invest more and more in a revision that has to be almost radical in teachers' training. They've now started to raise wages, but it's too little. Many teachers I know still have three jobs to get some dignity of life. Having teachers, who are such crucial instruments for a State, waste their time by making them work in several positions goes against the country, against Brazilians. To me, it's a pity, a real pity. There's a lot of money for spending in public schools, and some of

them should be models. It's about betting that a few public schools can still be better than the best private ones. If one day Brazil manages to show this, it will be an enormous advance. You have to show public schools that aren't uniform, that stand out, that make different things. It shouldn't be the private school the one showing they're different, because we can never transfer that difference to the public school. That difference must be born within the public school. A luxury pedagogy for the poor.

And how to do it properly?

I see that the Brazilian State has given great priority, currently, to universities, because it needs very good professionals. But the huge difference between one college teacher and another is so great that it's even an almost unthinkable thing. This has to turn around in Brazil. I have no authority – and even less so as a Portuguese – to send notes to Brazil, but I feel connected to many Brazilians, and I'm therefore saying this from my heart. And I also respect the effort that the last two administrations in Brazil have made to give better conditions to the poor. But in the sphere of education, it's essential to go much further. Of course it will take a long time. You feel bad when you realize you could have taken more advantage of things we didn't do, etc. Now in Portugal we found ourselves faced with a right wing alliance, with all the cultural impoverishment policies of the right that happened in the 1980s in the US. The same sort of impoverishment, the same blindness, the same classism. We're experiencing it more dramatically. In Brazil, at least, there's another atmosphere. In Brazil there isn't a right-wing administration. That is, there ought to be a lot of hope in what Brazilian governments can do, even if it takes a long time. We have to have a few great public schools and invest heavily in training with academic prestige. It probably has to have more study, even if teachers won't learn from more academic studies, nor become better practitioners, as we've seen in Europe. Like

António Nóvoa usually says, we have to bring the profession into training. And professional knowledge has been excluded from training as training became academic. In Europe, that is the contradiction. In Brazil there's still time to bring the profession into training. An initial training course for teachers is a professional course, it's not a course to learn the theories and the whole history of education. One obviously has to know such things, but one has to know the practices, learn them, criticize them, go back, improve them. That's painful,

because the teacher profession is very heavy, but it's a crucial one to the entire development. This is new in history: recognizing that teachers are indispensable. This more collective consciousness can help improve teacher profession's conditions and improve schools. I think it's necessary to give greater importance to public education in Brazil, because people deserve it. And because the State needs it.

Dear Sérgio, I thank you so much for such timely reflections.

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