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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND EDUCATION: CONTRIBUTIONS TO CITIZENSHIP FORMATION AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the pedagogical dimension of social movements and their strategic relevance to building critical and emancipatory citizenship in Brazil. This qualitative, bibliographic study was based on the theoretical contributions of Maria da Glória Gohn, Paulo Freire, Miguel Arroyo, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos and supplemented by recent studies published between 2022 and 2025. The objective was to investigate how non-formal educational practices developed within collective struggles for rights challenge abyssal thinking and foster an ecology of knowledges. The results indicate that movements such as the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) and the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST) function as educational territories that validate life trajectories and experiential knowledge frequently rendered invisible by traditional education. These spaces go beyond political demands and become environments of epistemological innovation in which critical consciousness is produced through transformative praxis. The study concludes that connecting systematized school knowledge with the ethics of social resistance is essential to a pedagogy capable of responding to contemporary challenges, promoting cognitive justice, and strengthening democratic life.

Keywords: Social movements. Non-formal education. Ecology of knowledges. Citizenship education. Critical consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding contemporary education requires moving beyond the traditional view that confines teaching and learning within school walls. In Brazil, a country marked by persistent social, racial, territorial, and economic inequalities, social movements emerge not only as political actors but also as important educational agents. Within these movements, knowledge, identities, and participatory practices are collectively constructed, forming a pedagogy of resistance. Recent studies reinforce the view that non-formal education expands opportunities for social development by connecting learning with lived experience, dialogue, and participation (Pinheiro, 2023; Souza, Rocha, and Santos, 2024).

This broader understanding of education is grounded in the premise that education is essentially a transformative praxis (Freire, 1987). From this perspective, social movements are no longer viewed solely as channels for making demands; they are also recognized for their foundational pedagogical dimension. According to Gohn (2012), collective action has a multiplier effect within civil society by creating forms of citizenship that participants learn and disseminate throughout the social body. Contemporary research on Freirean popular education also shows that dialogue, critical problem-posing, and organized participation remain central to emancipatory practices developed with historically marginalized groups (Paulo, Carrillo, and Faria, 2025).

The legitimacy of these educational processes, however, faces the challenge of epistemological marginalization. Knowledge produced through working the land, urban occupations, community organizing, and cultural collectives is frequently discredited by a modern, Eurocentric scientific logic. In opposition to this "abyssal thinking," Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) proposes an ecology of knowledges in which scientific knowledge does not erase other forms of knowing but instead engages in dialogue with knowledge arising from the experiences of subordinated groups. A recent mapping of educational scholarship on the ecology of knowledges confirms its relevance to critical intercultural education and to making visible forms of knowledge historically neutralized by dominant institutions (Nascimento and Candau, 2024).

The pursuit of cognitive justice is complemented by Miguel Arroyo's argument that education must recognize people through their concrete life trajectories (Arroyo, 2012). Learners are not passive recipients. They possess a formative heritage built within the family, the workplace, their territory, their culture, and community life—knowledge that schools often silence through purported neutrality or standardization. The limited number of studies explicitly connecting childhood, popular education, and social movements also reveals that educational research has not sufficiently examined many collective formative experiences (Soares, 2022).

In this context, this study analyzes social movements as educational spaces for developing critical consciousness and social participation. It seeks to understand how practices developed in these settings contribute to human emancipation and the democratization of educational processes beyond school by validating other subjects and other pedagogies. Recent studies of rural movements and an MTST literacy initiative demonstrate that collective struggle can simultaneously produce political consciousness, educational practices, and access to rights (Guerreiro, Silva, and Carvalho, 2023; Alcântara and Brutscher, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, bibliographic approach based on the critical analysis of scholarship at the intersection of Sociology and Education. This methodological choice made it possible to interpret the relationships among citizenship education, collective action, and learning in settings outside school without reducing social movements to isolated institutional experiences.

The analytical framework was based primarily on Maria da Glória Gohn's (2012) formulation of non-formal education, placed in dialogue with the ethical and political perspectives of Paulo Freire (1987), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007), and Miguel Arroyo (2012). The contributions of Dermeval Saviani (2016) and José Carlos Libâneo (1994) were also used to situate the functions and limitations of schooling in relation to education understood as a broader social practice. To update and diversify the discussion, ten studies published between 2022 and 2025 were incorporated, addressing popular education, rural and urban social movements, the ecology of knowledges, non-formal education, and cultural practices in marginalized urban communities.

The procedure consisted of locating, reading, and interpreting peer-reviewed books and scientific articles that connected the categories of social movements, citizenship, popular education, non-formal education, critical consciousness, and epistemological plurality. Priority was given to recent studies clearly related to the Brazilian context, while classic works were retained because they provide the conceptual foundation for the debate. The material was examined through hermeneutic and critical reading to identify convergences, tensions, and empirical illustrations of the formative role of collective action. This theoretical cross-analysis made it possible to discuss how these educational spaces promote emancipation and social transformation without treating education as a merely instrumental activity.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The pedagogy of resistance in motion

The intersection of social movements and education reveals that non-formal learning is not merely an appendage to schooling but a field in which autonomous knowledge is produced. When Arroyo's argument is considered alongside contemporary Brazilian experiences, it becomes clear that historically marginalized collective subjects do not enter struggles as "blank slates." They bring pedagogies of survival, work, culture, and solidarity that challenge rigid curricula and disrupt what the author calls the "large estate of knowledge." Research on childhood and popular education, as well as on collective resistance in rural areas, confirms the formative depth of these experiences and the need to increase their visibility in educational scholarship (Soares, 2022; Guerreiro, Silva, and Carvalho, 2023).

Education beyond school walls: the role of social movements

Reducing education to the physical boundaries of the classroom means disregarding the formative processes that shape people within their social realities. Challenging this restricted understanding, Arroyo (2012) describes learners as historically complex subjects whose life trajectories and resistance constitute a formative heritage that schools frequently render invisible. In the author's words:

School pedagogies have also advanced by recognizing that when Other Subjects—other children, adolescents, young people, and adults—arrive at schools and universities, they bring other forms of knowledge and other experiences of the world, and therefore other readings of the world, the city, and the countryside (Arroyo, 2012, p. 34).

For Arroyo (2012), schools must recognize that social movements produce knowledge capable of disrupting established hierarchies. Learning is not the exclusive privilege of academia or traditional curricula. Struggles for housing, land, work, and survival constitute powerful pedagogical settings. Experiences developed in teacher education and at an MTST popular school show how contact with collective organizations can give new meaning to professional preparation and connect literacy,

political participation, and dignity (Torres, 2024; Alcântara and Brutscher, 2024).

By challenging the "large estate of knowledge," social movements become territories in which citizenship education takes concrete form through social practices and active participation. Recognizing other actors and territories in the production of knowledge is therefore necessary to destabilize the mistaken idea that schools hold a monopoly on education.

Cultural movements in marginalized urban communities, including hip-hop collectives, funk networks, poetry gatherings, and community meetings, also serve as educational agents that validate historically marginalized knowledge. By addressing race, class, territory, and belonging, these groups transform life in marginalized communities into a formative heritage and challenge formal education to recognize other pedagogies of life. Recent studies on hip-hop pedagogy and urban art show that rap, freestyle battles, funk, and other cultural practices from marginalized communities can bring school learning closer to youth cultures, antiracist education, political development, and creative participation (Tejera and Siqueira Junior, 2025; Coêlho, 2025). The challenge is not merely to "include" these students, but to allow their knowledge to question and transform the curriculum.

In this context, social movements can no longer be understood solely as forces for political pressure. They must also be recognized as legitimate producers of knowledge. They constitute educational spaces in which learning is inseparable from collective practice. As Maria da Glória Gohn observes:

The fundamental change produced by the everyday practices of popular movements concerns the nature of social relations. This is not merely a process of individual learning that results in the politicization of participants. That is one of its most visible aspects. It involves the development of individual consciousness. The most important result, however, occurs at the collective level (Gohn, Maria da Glória, 2012, p. 16).

Social movements thus function as spaces of collective learning in which citizenship ceases to be an abstract concept and becomes a lived practice. Through participation, people develop a critical awareness of the structures around them and transform indignation into conscious social action. This participatory and contextual character also enables popular education to confront exclusion and respond critically to technological and social changes (Pinheiro, 2023).

Education that extends beyond institutional walls becomes especially evident through the concept of non-formal education. According to Gohn (2012), this modality is characterized by political intentionality and differs both from the bureaucratic rigidity of formal systems and from the unsystematic nature of everyday informal learning. Contemporary analyses add that its flexibility, collaboration, and capacity to respond to participants' circumstances can complement schooling and strengthen social development (Souza, Rocha, and Santos, 2024).

The central transformation occurs in the nature of social relationships. Learning is not only an individual process of politicization but also a collectively consolidated construction. In popular movements, people learn to participate by participating, making citizenship concrete through the exercise of claiming rights. The MTST experience in Recife illustrates this relationship by combining adult literacy, territorial organization, the right to housing, and human dignity within the same popular education project (Alcântara and Brutscher, 2024).

This discussion aligns with Arroyo's (2012) defense of a pedagogy that recognizes the human being as a whole. When knowledge produced through struggle and community life is validated, citizenship education no longer fits within rigid curricula and instead takes shape through social practices and active participation. The continued relevance of Freirean popular education confirms that dialogue and collective problem-posing remain central to emancipatory practices and public initiatives serving marginalized populations (Paulo, Carrillo, and Faria, 2025).

Invisibilized knowledge and the praxis of transformation

Understanding educational processes requires a perspective that extends beyond formal institutions and recognizes social movements as privileged spaces for producing knowledge and subjectivities. This pedagogy of conflict challenges academia's monopoly over legitimate knowledge and reveals experiences historically maintained in subordinated positions. In opposition to abyssal thinking, social movements create conditions for epistemological plurality. Recent research on the ecology of knowledges emphasizes that critical intercultural education depends on confronting standardization, monoculturalism, and the universalization of a single epistemological model (Nascimento and Candau, 2024).

The educational practices of the MTST and MST exemplify this dynamic by fostering dialogue between scientific rigor and urban, rural, community-based, and ancestral knowledge. In these contexts, Santos's (2007) ecology of knowledges becomes concrete: knowledge ceases to be static and becomes a dynamic instrument of liberation. Studies of Movimento 21 and an MTST literacy project demonstrate that popular education is built through resistance, territorial belonging, and the collective struggle for rights (Guerreiro, Silva, and Carvalho, 2023; Alcântara and Brutscher, 2024).

This break with Eurocentric logic challenges the practical production of absences. By validating knowledge previously rendered invisible, people resist the waste of experience and transform deprivation into collective power. Political participation thus becomes praxis: interpreting reality, taking collective action, and critically evaluating the effects of that action.

A dialogic pedagogy transforms the reading of reality from a passive exercise into a project of intervention. Education developed within social movements can therefore cultivate the critical transitive consciousness described by Freire (1987), enabling citizens to become subjects rather than objects of history. Gohn (2012) also emphasizes that this multiplying pedagogical process consolidates the critical consciousness necessary for citizenship. The contemporary renewal of Freire's legacy demonstrates that this perspective remains relevant to literacy education, teacher preparation, social movements, and public policy (Paulo, Carrillo, and Faria, 2025).

Tensions and complementarities: formal schooling and non-formal education

The relationship between schools and non-formal educational spaces constitutes a dialectical unity capable of strengthening comprehensive human development. Schools organize access to systematized knowledge, while social movements and other collective spaces give political and experiential substance to theoretical knowledge. Rather than being mutually exclusive, these modalities can complement each other when institutions recognize the flexibility, accessibility, and participatory nature of non-formal education (Souza, Rocha, and Santos, 2024).

For Saviani (2016), public schools have the social function of guaranteeing access to scholarly and universal knowledge because scientific understanding provides tools for interpreting society and class relations. This education, however, risks becoming abstract when it becomes detached from urgent social needs. The Freirean reading of the world must therefore accompany the reading of the word, and social movements provide territories of praxis in which systematized knowledge encounters direct action. Accounts of teacher preparation developed in collaboration with popular movements also indicate that academic education becomes more meaningful when it engages with collective struggles and concrete social contradictions (Torres, 2024).

José Carlos Libâneo emphasizes the relationship between education and society's formative processes, observing that human beings have historically established cooperative relationships to ensure their survival (Libâneo, 1994). This cooperation is educational because it produces shared

meanings, norms, skills, and forms of participation that precede and extend beyond formal schooling.

This complementarity therefore lies in the fact that schools can provide theoretical tools for interpreting reality, while collective action develops political subjects through experience. The point is not to replace formal education with non-formal education, but to recognize that social movements pressure schools to become more inclusive and responsive to contemporary demands. The ecology of knowledges strengthens this relationship by fostering exchange and mutual enrichment between socially valued school knowledge and other forms of knowing (Nascimento and Candau, 2024).

Challenges and limitations of education within social movements

Despite their formative potential, educational practices within social movements face obstacles that extend beyond logistical limitations. A central difficulty is institutional resistance to knowledge that does not conform to the metrics of formal education. The "large estate of knowledge" discussed by Arroyo (2012) excludes pedagogies of resistance by classifying them as merely political or unsystematic. The scarcity of studies directly connecting popular education, social movements, and specific groups such as children also shows how certain experiences remain peripheral to academic agendas (Soares, 2022).

Institutional refusal to validate the knowledge produced by social movements is not merely bureaucratic; it also promotes spatial and intellectual segregation. In analyzing how educational systems respond to these groups, Arroyo (2012) argues that the separation among social collectives has become radical:

It is not merely a matter of margins, but of being separated by walls and barriers. Margins and borders can be approached; walls and barriers prevent any attempt to cross. They are built by the groups on the inside to prevent any attempt by those on the outside to pass through (Arroyo, 2012, p. 43).

The image of walls helps explain why schools frequently fail to be inclusive. These walls take the form of rigid curricula, Eurocentric norms, and procedures through which institutions determine which knowledge can be validated. People involved in social movements are not merely at the margins of the system; their experiences may be actively prevented from receiving scientific and curricular recognition. Breaking down these boundaries requires more than pedagogical reform. It requires dismantling the epistemological barriers that prevent schools from recognizing themselves in students' struggles and lives. Inclusion must not be treated as a favor granted by the institution, but as recognition of people's dignity and the plurality of knowledges.

For Arroyo (2012), social movements do more than fight for rights; through struggle, they also produce knowledge, values, and pedagogies. The educational challenge is not simply to bring schools into the spaces occupied by social movements, but to allow the pedagogy of struggle to permeate the schools themselves. Experiences with rap, freestyle battles, hip-hop, and funk show that when cultural knowledge from marginalized communities enters educational practice with a critical purpose, it can promote antiracist learning, student participation, affirmation of identity, and connections between curriculum and territory (Tejera and Siqueira Junior, 2025; Coêlho, 2025).

Material hardship, discontinuous public support, and institutional instability can also limit the systematization and continuity of educational initiatives. Relationships with formal schools often remain fragmented, and lived struggles may be forced into rigid curricula instead of being welcomed through an ecology of knowledges. Rural and urban studies nevertheless show that social movements continue to develop educational responses under adverse conditions by connecting literacy, political education, territorial resistance, and the defense of rights (Guerreiro, Silva, and Carvalho, 2023; Alcântara and Brutscher, 2024). Another challenge is preventing non-formal education from being

reduced to survival training and losing the critical, emancipatory purpose defended by Freire (1987).

Overcoming these limitations requires that the relationship between systematized knowledge and knowledge gained through experience be treated not as a concession by schools but as a necessary dialectical unity. Building pedagogical bridges depends on formal institutions' ability to remain receptive to lessons from occupations, rural territories, cultural collectives, and marginalized urban communities. Critical intercultural education offers a viable direction by replacing epistemological hierarchy with dialogue, productive tension, and mutual learning among different forms of knowledge (Nascimento and Candau, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The analysis indicates that a rigid opposition between formal and non-formal education is insufficient to explain the complexity of contemporary learning. Social movements function as educational spaces that challenge academia's monopoly on knowledge and constitute territories of resistance, solidarity, and knowledge production. In these contexts, education ceases to function as a unilateral transfer of content—the banking model criticized by Freire—and becomes a means of reading and intervening in the world.

Recognizing historically marginalized people as producers of knowledge and culture is essential to cognitive justice and to overcoming the abyssal thinking present in educational institutions. The ecology of knowledges is not merely a theoretical aspiration. It is realized when life trajectories, community memories, work, cultural expressions, and political experiences enter into dialogue with systematized knowledge. Schools and universities should therefore not subordinate these forms of knowledge but establish relationships grounded in otherness, rigor, and mutual recognition.

Human emancipation requires epistemologically open educational institutions capable of learning from the streets, rural communities, occupations, and marginalized urban communities. Connecting scientific rigor with collective political experience strengthens both dimensions: it expands the social meaning of school knowledge and provides organized struggles with additional tools for interpreting reality. Through this dialogue, education can respond more fully to contemporary inequalities and serve as a means of freedom, democratic participation, and social transformation.

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