

## ARTICLE

## WAYS OF BEING AND EXPERIENCING YOUTH AMONG HIGH SCHOOLERS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The article discusses the youth condition among high schoolers in a rural Community. It analyzes some results of a survey carried out between 2017 and 2019 in an irrigation project in the Brazilian Northeast region. We collected data through questionnaires, document analysis, field observation, and narrative interviews with thirteen students aged between 14 and 24. We used the quantitative data to build the students' general profiles. The interviews were analyzed based on Content Analysis and Discourse Analysis. Despite sharing common experiences, especially concerning school and work, the results indicate a diversity of trajectories and projects among students. The representations about the experiences of being a young peasant, the identification with the territory, and the schooling place in their future projects varied depending on the social origin, the individual and family trajectories, and racial and gender belonging.

**Keywords:** rural youth, high school, education in the countryside.

### MODOS DE SER E VIVER A CONDIÇÃO JUVENIL ENTRE ESTUDANTES DO ENSINO MÉDIO NO CAMPO

**RESUMO:** Este artigo discute a condição juvenil entre estudantes do Ensino Médio de uma comunidade rural. Analisa alguns resultados de uma pesquisa realizada entre 2017 e 2019 em um projeto de irrigação na região Nordeste do Brasil. Os dados foram coletados por meio de questionários, análise documental, observação de campo e entrevistas semiestruturadas com treze alunos de 14 a 24 anos. Os dados quantitativos foram utilizados para construir o perfil geral dos alunos. As entrevistas foram analisadas com base na Análise de Conteúdo e na Análise do Discurso. Apesar de compartilharem experiências comuns, principalmente em relação à escola e ao trabalho, os resultados indicam uma diversidade de

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**Palavras-chave:** juventude rural, ensino médio, educação no campo.

## FORMAS DE SER Y VIVIR LA CONDICIÓN JUVENIL ENTRE ESTUDIANTES DE SECUNDARIA EN EL CAMPO

**RESUMEN:** El artículo discute la condición juvenil de los estudiantes de secundaria de una comunidad rural. Analiza algunos resultados de una encuesta que se realizó entre 2017 y 2019 en un proyecto de riego en la Región Nordeste de Brasil. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de cuestionarios, análisis de documentos, observación de campo y entrevistas narrativas con trece estudiantes de 14 a 24 años. Se utilizaron datos cuantitativos para construir el perfil general de los estudiantes. Las entrevistas fueron analizadas con base en el Análisis de Contenido y el Análisis del Discurso. A pesar de compartir experiencias comunes, principalmente en relación a la escuela y el trabajo, los resultados indican una diversidad de trayectorias y proyectos entre los estudiantes. Las representaciones sobre las experiencias de ser joven campesino, la identificación con el territorio y el lugar de la escolarización en sus proyectos de futuro variaron según el origen social, las trayectorias individuales y familiares y las pertenencias racial y de género.

**Palabras clave:** juventud rural, escuela secundaria, educación en el campo.

## INTRODUCTION

This article results from research into the school experience and plans of young peasant high school students from a rural municipality in the Northeast of Brazil, in the state of Bahia.<sup>2</sup> They lived with their families in an irrigation project community, where the school was also located. The central question that guided the research was the place of school in the life plans of young people in the context of agricultural modernization.

The article analyzes the youth condition among the research participants based on some central elements, such as school and work, and aspects in their testimonies about their social and identity affiliations. How did these young people see themselves? How did they identify as rural residents?

The idea of youth status is based on an analytical category that allows us to understand youth based on their social situation – access to material and cultural goods produced by society – as well as their generational experience – values, representations, cultural practices, and lifestyles (Dayrell, 2007). “Space is also considered a defining factor” of this youth status (Cassab, 2018).

This group presents its ways of being and acting in society and experiences the impacts of the unequal distribution of economic and sociocultural resources (Weisheimer, 2019). In addition to an approach restricted to the symbolic or socioeconomic dimension, the notion of youth condition aims to

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capture concrete young people, who articulate these dimensions in their daily experiences (Sposito, 2009; Abramo, Branco, 2011; Sposito, Tarábola, 2017).

From this perspective, one aspect is central to the focus of this article. This phase of life is conceived based on the specificity of each context, which leads us to understand youth as a social construct and, as Bourdieu (1983) reminds us, a manipulable concept, endowed with several meanings, depending on the power relations in a given society. Thus, the category of youth also includes social representations, imaginaries, and discourses about what it is/should be to be young in a specific society, which self-images can condition about “what I want”, “what I can” and “what I should” be as a young person. In other words, it is essential to understand how these actors – in this case, the young people in this research – identified themselves in this phase of life based on the experiences and conditions in which they lived.

Rural youth were, for a long time, absent from academic studies. In addition to the scarcity of research on the subject, when it was present, the approaches tended to emphasize the negative aspects, especially the movement from the countryside to the city and its impacts on their living conditions. This view of rural youth from the perspective of a “social problem” began to change somewhat in the 1990s, with a greater density of studies on the condition of Brazilian youth in general, which began to understand young people in their diversity as social actors and subjects of rights, no longer seeing them only from the perspective of specifically youth problems (Sposito, 2009). A broader thematization of young people by Brazilian researchers, especially since the turn of the millennium, bringing new questions and categories of analysis, allowed for a richer approach to the universe of youth experiences in the countryside.

Also, in the context of public policies, there was a long silence regarding young Brazilian peasants, although, between 2005 and 2015, Brazil experienced a period of expansion of actions aimed at young people in general. These policies resulted from the pressure from youth groups and researchers to consider them as subjects of rights, a movement also seen in the case of rural youth (Castro, 2009; 2016). However, these policies had a limited reach for this segment of Brazilian youth, as seen in some data from this research. Initiatives focused on rural youth remained residual, limited to a few departments of the federal executive branch, with low-reach programs that did not engage with the reality of peasants, which reveals a difficulty in effectively including their demands in the public agenda (Castro, 2016).

From this perspective, students at the school under investigation were asked about their ways of being young, seeking to understand how they experienced their youthful condition in a context affected by direct State intervention, through an intensive agricultural development project, and in the context of a lack of public policies aimed at this public.

As discussed previously, the ways of being young are conditioned by the social and historical contexts in which this phase of life is experienced. In contemporary times, rural life has been impacted by several economic and social transformations and by technological developments that have brought about significant changes in daily life and the world of work, reducing jobs in some sectors and creating new occupations and specific demands for certain services. These changes, subject to the logic of neoliberal globalization, have generated feelings of uncertainty and a search for guarantees regarding the future. In the case of rural life, these dynamics lead to a marked displacement of people beyond their region of origin, often in a fluid manner, in a movement of comings and goings (Castro, 2013), or even migration and abandonment of agricultural activities (Weisheimer, 2019).

In some cases, the research found that continuous movements in family trajectories are often characterized as a shared experience. In the case of rural children and young people, departures and returns due to studies, work or changes in parental housing were common in the region.

This context impacts individual trajectories and social groups, producing a feeling of insecurity and abandonment. Unable to count on a broad social protection network guaranteed by public and social policies, professional and academic success becomes a matter of merit, with individuals taking responsibility for their existence, which Araújo and Martuccelli (2019) called “hyper-actors”. For these authors, given the precariousness of institutions constituting support to help them face structural challenges, people are pressured to sustain their individuality. They are forced to “forge themselves” in the face of uncertainties, ambivalences, and multiple challenges of social life. In other words, the term refers to the individual “who has to resolve things for himself, through supports that he builds, as a set of indispensable protections to be able to exist in society” (Martuccelli, 2016, p. 61).

There is difficulty in accessing land, good jobs, or any source of income that allows them to invest in their autonomy as peasants, without the support of policies and a network of public facilities that provide support to rural youth, who end up left to their devices on their trajectories and future expectations. This situation, accompanied by high land concentration and the expansion of agribusiness, causes profound changes in the way of life in the countryside in a scenario of increasing social inequalities, especially reducing job and income opportunities (Castro, 2017; 2016).

This article aims to address some data that contribute to understanding the experience of these young people, providing a glimpse into their self-image as peasants. The first part shows the approach and methodological procedures used during the research. It addresses the context and the school, highlighting aspects that allow us to understand the scenario from which their statements are inserted. In the third part, the article analyzes some data about young people and their experiences and demands.

## **THE PATHS OF RESEARCH**

The research sought to understand the place that school occupied in the youth experience and life projects of young high school students in a small rural Brazilian community. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the processes involved, which requires immersion in the field and direct contact with the participants (Flick, 2009; Minayo, 2021). According to Esteban (2010, p. 129), “a fundamental characteristic of qualitative studies is their attention to context” since it is not possible to understand social phenomena by separating them from the context in which they occur.

Seeking to build a closer relationship with the field, the first step of the research required a long-term immersion in the school, which began in August 2017, with biweekly visits. This immersion intensified in 2018 after the approval of research by the UFMG Ethics Committee. That year, daily observation of the students began in the classroom and other spaces of the school, aiming to collect information that would help understand how they related to their studies and to analyze their relationships, interactions, and dialogues with their peers, understanding their behaviors and their social practices. During this period, it was possible to learn more about where the young people lived, worked and studied, and to get to know their families and their routines through repeated visits. This immersion was crucial to understanding some central aspects of their lives, their stories, their sociocultural diversity and the multiple “ways of being” as a young peasant.

Regarding the data collection instruments and procedures (Alves-Mazzotti; Gewandsznajder, 2002), the research used participant observation, a structured questionnaire, narrative interviews, and documentary analysis. During 2018, the young people were monitored at school and in the classroom. Also, we visited the families and workplaces of some of them. At that time, the main aim was to gather data to understand their relationship with the school and to learn about their daily lives and the conditions in which they lived. At the beginning of the fieldwork, two conversation circles were held with the students, the theme of which revolved around how they perceived themselves as young peasants and what they thought about the context in which they lived. These moments were important to see the different profiles of the young people and identify potential interviewees.<sup>3</sup>

In July 2018, a questionnaire was administered to 117 students, including questions about socioeconomic and cultural aspects of the young people and their families, the conditions of school attendance, and the motivations and challenges for their schooling. The responses were organized and cross-referenced to form a database that allowed the profile of the students to be drawn up and information to be gathered that was explored in the subsequent stages of the field research.

After this stage, 13 young people were selected to conduct narrative interviews, seeking to include people with different profiles on age, gender, racial affiliation, marital status, work, and relationship with the countryside. In addition, we sought to consider the condition of students who were children of families who lived solely from production on their land and those who worked on corporate land, since this seemed to be an important social differentiation in that context. The statements were analyzed based on some assumptions of Content Analysis and Discourse Analysis (Chizzotti, 1998; Franco, 2008; Bardin, 1977; Sampaio; Lycarião, 2021).

Conducting the research was a pleasurable moment due to the welcoming way the entire management and teaching team received the project, making themselves available to support the research, providing documents, and kindly allowing access to the classrooms and other areas of the school. The students were no different; they enjoyed discussing their dreams, difficulties, and daily lives, and wanted to show their workplaces. This situation greatly facilitated the process of conducting the research.

One of the first challenges of the research was to break away from the researchers' usual perspective. Given the routines and school activities, it was difficult for an educator/researcher to develop a stance of estrangement, in the search for new aspects that could help us understand the condition of youth in the countryside. In addition, there was the expectation of finding a profile of young people that was consistent with the images constructed by our personal experience of being a young person in the countryside. These representations seemed distant from the young people who populated the playground and classrooms of *Colégio Estadual Projeto Formoso*.

During the research, it was necessary to carry out a deconstruction exercise, since we expected to find young people with sociocultural characteristics similar to those we were used to. Thus, it was necessary to spend more time with the young people in their daily lives. In addition to observing events and activities at school, the researcher visited their families and workplaces. This was a great challenge, as it required travel and negotiations that interfered with different times, spaces, and relationships. The application of the questionnaires was another step that required special care. There

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<sup>3</sup> After being duly informed about the research, all participants signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (TCLE) (adults and guardians of minors) and the Free and Informed Assent Form (TALE) (minors). The approval of research was by the Ethics Committee of UFMG under number CAAE 88962018.7.0000.5149 and protocol number 2.701.229.

were some difficulties for the students in understanding some items in the questionnaire, especially when they addressed more objective aspects of the family (income, parents' education, family trajectories, etc.).

One of the first challenges of the research was to break away from our usual perspective. Given the routines and activities of schools, it was difficult for an educator/researcher to develop a stance of estrangement, searching for new aspects that could help us understand the youth condition in the countryside. In addition, there was the expectation of finding a profile of young people consistent with the images constructed about the experiences of youth in the countryside. These representations seemed distant from the experiences of the students who populated the courtyard and classrooms of the *Colégio Estadual Projeto Formoso*. Throughout the research, an exercise in deconstruction was necessary, since we expected to find young people with sociocultural characteristics close to those we were accustomed to. Thus, it was necessary to establish greater interaction with the young people in their daily lives. In addition to observing events and activities at school, visits were made to their families and workplaces. This was a great challenge since it required travel and negotiations that interfered with different times, spaces, and relationships. Another step with special care was related to the application of the questionnaires. There were some difficulties for students in understanding some items in the questionnaire, especially when they addressed more objective aspects of the family (income, parents' education, family trajectories, etc.).

To complement the information and allow a broader analysis of the context studied, a documentary analysis of the Irrigation Project and the Political Pedagogical Project (PPP) of the school was carried out.

## **THE RESEARCH CONTEXT: BRIEF CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE COLLEGE**

The research was conducted at a state high school in the community where the Project is based, in a rural area 800 kilometers from the state capital. Initially inhabited by indigenous peoples, the region where the research was conducted was occupied during the 17th century by cattle ranchers and Africans who were displaced to Brazil as slave labor (Andrade, 1961). During this historical process, features of land ownership in Brazil were repeated: land concentration and the agrarian conflicts that arose from it (Estrela, 2009). Tensions resulting from the expropriation of the peasantry intensified for years in the region, culminating in mass emigration and the production of a marked degree of social inequality.

Due to the geographic characteristics and priorities of Brazilian socioeconomic development, the region remained isolated for a long time, only receiving the attention of the federal government from 1970 onwards, when programs for the economic exploitation of the Brazilian Cerrado emerged (Santos et al., 2010). At that time, the implementation of irrigation projects began in the Northeast of the country, with the argument of creating conditions to reduce social inequalities and poverty, stimulating economic development. In this context, the Formoso Public Irrigation Project emerged in 1988.

Since the last decade of the last century, the municipality has been experiencing a process of “capitalist modernization” of the countryside (Silva, 1999). To this end, areas with significant territorial extension were designated for monoculture for export, using technological innovations in agricultural production, such as modern machines for pumping water and spraying pesticides on crops.

Coelho Neto (2004) draws attention to some elements that make the region's irrigation policy unique. According to the author, public investment in these projects was made under the pretext of stimulating agricultural development and reducing poverty in the region. However, how they were

implemented and the selection of beneficiaries showed greater alignment with the interests of capital. Among the elements that make this irrigation model unique, two aspects deserve to be highlighted due to the impacts on the formation of a new spatiality: the form of access to land and the criteria for selecting irrigators.

Regarding access to land, Brazilian legislation establishes that the State may expropriate land in the interest of society. However, in the case of the irrigation model implemented in the region, this criterion became secondary, since it allowed direct negotiation between landowners and payment in kind, removing “the prospect of a rapprochement between irrigation and agrarian reform and the effective possibility of reorganizing the land structure” (Coelho Neto, 2004, p. 89). According to this author, several legal changes and changes in the configuration of the Project set precedents for the criteria used in the selection of new occupants to reduce the possibilities of access to land by former residents. Thus, priority was given to a development model that distanced itself from the initial objectives of strengthening family farming and reducing poverty (Coelho Neto, 2004; Estrela, 2009).

The Project covered an area of approximately 12 thousand hectares with irrigable potential, of which almost 62% were prioritized for the agricultural business sector (Santos, 2007). In the organization of the Project, two situations existed in the families' place of residence, as a result of changes in its implementation process. In some cases, the settlers lived in agricultural villages and, in others, on the lot they owned.

The agricultural model developed on the Project lots was based on agribusiness, with the practice of monoculture crops, especially bananas, and the use of intense mechanization, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides. In the case of business lots, the technology used was more modern, especially in the irrigation model. This is because, according to the Project, business irrigators could choose their irrigation model and technology while those who occupied family lots had to use the technological structure that the government made available. According to Coelho Neto (2004), this structure is now an obsolete technology, which once again puts family farmers at a disadvantage in production compared to business owners.

The school was located in a rural area of the Irrigation Project. It had only three classrooms, a kitchen, a room for teachers, bathrooms, a computer lab with ten computers connected to the internet, and a small backyard. Although simple, the school was a cozy environment. However, it did not have a library or other reading space.

In 2018, the school had approximately 140 high school students in the afternoon (60) and evening (80) shifts. Traditionally, young people and adults who wanted to attend high school were forced to migrate (or commute daily) to neighboring cities and were therefore forced to compete for a place in the few existing schools. In Brazil, only in 2009, the public high school education became mandatory<sup>4</sup>. We observed an increase in the number of enrollments in the last stage of basic education before this legislation, but these places were always mostly concentrated in urban areas. Only 10% of the places were in schools located in rural areas (INEP, 2017). The concentration of high school enrollments in urban areas grew by 94.6% in 2021 (INEP, 2021). At the time the questionnaire was administered, 117 students were present, which constituted the total number of respondents considered for data analysis.

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<sup>4</sup> BRAZIL. Brasília. Office of the President, Chief of Staff, Deputy Chief of Staff for Legal Affairs. Constitutional Amendment No. 59, of November 11, 2009. Amends items I and VII of art. 208 to provide for mandatory education from four to seventeen years of age expand the scope of supplementary programs to all stages of basic education, and amend § 4 of art. 211 and § 3 of art. 212 and the caput of art. 214, with the insertion of item VI in this provision.

Despite the new legislation, the rural population in Bahia, which was already suffering from the limited availability of places in the first and last stages of basic education, also began to face a policy of closing the few schools existing in rural areas. High school, in its traditional organization, was eliminated in many locations. In its place, the state began to offer a distance education modality, called “High School through Technological Intermediation” (*EMITec-Ensino Médio por Intermediação Tecnológica*)<sup>5</sup> since 2011.

EMITec was created to meet the demand for high school vacancies in hard-to-reach locations. However, this modality began to be implemented indiscriminately, disregarding the “hard-to-reach” characteristic and considering only the state’s financial savings.

Schools that still offered in-person high school education in rural areas were threatened by closure, especially those that operated without their own space, at the mercy of ceded or rented buildings. This was the situation of the school under investigation, which since its first year of operation suffered the tensions arising from not having its own space, having only a rented building, and with conditions that were not favorable for its full operation.

It is important to highlight the efforts of the management team to ensure, within the possibilities, the conditions for students to feel welcomed in the school environment. It was possible to notice attempts to create opportunities for students to reflect on the condition of rural residents through activities such as school gymkhanas and June celebrations. However, these were still incipient and specific initiatives, without constituting a guideline for the school organization and pedagogical practices that reflected an educational project specific to the countryside.

Regarding the teachers, the seven professionals who worked at the school had completed higher education, but only one teacher had a specific degree in the area of activity. Of the five teachers who taught the class studied, three were full-time and two were hired as temporary employees.

Regarding the teachers' residence, only one had a home in the village. These teachers from outside the community experienced the setbacks of commuting: tiredness, delays in class schedules, frequent absences, in addition to other consequences with their inevitable pedagogical implications. It is also important to highlight the fact that these teachers worked in other schools in the neighboring municipality during the morning shift.

## **THE CONDITION OF YOUTH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATION AND WORK**

The data collected through the questionnaire and preliminary observations allowed us to perceive the diversity inherent in that group of young people. This diversity clashed with a commonly homogenizing view of young peasants. The most visible aspect was the large number of activities associated with urban life found there, which contrasted with bucolic representations of the countryside and rural communities that make up the social imaginary. This further heightened our interest in understanding who these young people are. What do they do? Where are they from? Do they identify

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<sup>5</sup> Program created in 2011 by the government of the state of Bahia, regulated by ordinance 424/2011 and published in the Official Gazette of January 21, 2011, serving young people and adults who, primarily, live in distant locations (or difficult to access) where there is no provision of high school and/or students from locations with an insufficient number of professionals with specific training in certain areas of education. Information available at: <http://escolas.educacao.ba.gov.br/emitec>. Accessed: May 2019.



themselves as young peasants? What can we say about the experience of living this phase of life in the countryside?

They shared that their experiences were directly or indirectly related to banana monoculture and that they lived with their families in areas of the irrigated perimeter. Some lived as children of owners of family plots that grew bananas, and others were residents of villages and agricultural workers on plots in the region.

The distribution according to gender was balanced, with 58 men and 59 women. However, there was a tendency for the night shift to be occupied by a majority of men (59%) as opposed to the afternoon shift (42.4%). The hypothesis of this concentration was related to work, as this shift tends to concentrate a population of working students. Likewise, those young people of older ages chose to study on the night shift: of the 51 young people who attended school at night, 42 (82%) were 17 years old or older.

The data also reveal the situation of age-grade distortion affecting public schools, particularly in working-class and rural areas. Data on the age of the school's students show that more than half of them (53%) were older than the ideal age for the grade they were studying, which was more evident in the evening class. Considering each shift specifically, among the students who attended school in the afternoon, 22 (33%) were in a situation of age-grade distortion, which rose to 38 (74.5%) in the evening class. Also, of the total number of students in the school, approximately 48 (41%) were two or more years behind.

When looking at the data on young people's school trajectories, it was clear that more students had failed or dropped out of school. According to the data, 49 (42%) had failed at least once and 21 (18%) had been forced to interrupt their studies at some point. When explaining the reasons that led them to fail or drop out of school, they gave several reasons, and the most frequent were changes in place of residence and difficulties in reconciling work in the fields with studies.

These reports also highlight the reality to which these young people are subjected, forced to combine work and study, often from childhood. At the same time, this reality denounces the historical debts that society has toward rural populations, especially due to the lack of public policies in rural areas.

This leads some families to have high expectations that their children's education can overcome the lack of opportunities offered by their social status. Cases have been found in which some parents decided to force their children to repeat a school year, considering that they had not achieved the expected level of learning. Having an even shorter school history than their children, they tend to reproduce an ideal of education that is still very traditional, which may explain some attitudes. Parents from working-class backgrounds, in general, tend to be considered incapable of questioning the school and its procedures, even if this behavior is detrimental to their children. Thus, retention appears as a strategy for some guardians.

In other cases, retention was associated with the institution's inability to monitor school records and adequately assess the level of education that corresponded to their knowledge. Some young people came from families where it was common to move between different places of residence and work. Thus, depending on the degree of precariousness of these living conditions, their school records were lost. In this case, students were enrolled according to what they and their families imagined would be their last year of school.

Another element of the students' profile was the young people's marital status. When analyzing the data, contrary to the common sense that "people from the countryside get married early",

only 11% (13) of them were married or in a stable union, and most of them were women (12). This condition of greater representation of women among married young people seems common among Brazilian youth in general, as revealed by the *Profile of Brazilian Youth* in the early 2000s (Abramo; Branco, 2011). However, these rates are well above the global average for high school students. As Stropasolas (2004, p. 253) observed almost two decades ago, “several authors emphasize marriage as one of the most important categories for the analysis of the peasantry”. In addition to being a value, it was also related to the social, cultural, and economic reproduction of the countryside. Despite this, among the young people surveyed, there was a tendency to postpone marriage as a way of prioritizing studies and professional integration, especially among women. Could this situation be changing in the contemporary peasant youth experience?

Authors such as Abramoway (1998), Monteiro, and Mujica (2022) have studied migration from a gender perspective, showing how this movement affects young people more, particularly girls, with implications for marriage, leading to the masculinization of the countryside. Since young women traditionally do not inherit or have difficulty inheriting land ownership, they move to the city searching for work and study opportunities. They rarely return to the countryside, since, with new cultural values, they prefer to marry young men from urban areas. Thus, there is a tendency for a greater concentration of single men in the countryside (Stropasolas, 2004).

Regarding occupation, many students said they were not working at the time of the survey, most of whom were women enrolled in the afternoon school. This data appears to be related to the phenomenon of hidden work since many who said they were not working performed various activities on the family plot, temporary work in agriculture, or “odd jobs” in other areas. Almost all of them said they helped with household chores and took care of younger siblings, which was not recognized as an occupation.

Among those who said they worked, they tended to mention paid activities carried out outside the home. Tasks such as taking care of the house, and children, helping parents in the fields, or doing odd jobs were generally disregarded. This reproduced the invisibility of the work of peasant women (as well as children and adolescents), leaving a set of activities fundamental to the productive/reproductive dynamics in the countryside invisible.

The greatest job opportunities in the region were concentrated in agriculture, which tended to absorb male labor, while activities considered “light” were left to women, such as working in the service sector and commerce, among others. “Heavy” and “light” are imprecise terms for work (Paulilo, 1987), as they are social productions based on social relations of gender, race, and class. They also bear the mark of historical and cultural processes that underlie the social and sexual division of labor, differentiating recognized and prestigious occupations from those undervalued. The testimonies collected from young people tended to reproduce such social representations that, naturalized, did not allow them to recognize as work and reflect on their implications for their experiences as students and young people.

Despite this, the survey data showed that, although the number of young people who declared not working was relatively high, the majority stated that they carried out some work activity. Of the 117 young people, 76 (65%) declared employment relationships, of which only four worked with a formal contract on business plots, another 20 said they worked as day laborers on business plots and 25 of them said they worked on their family plots. Only eight people said they worked independently on

their plot. In general, these were occupations in precarious conditions, part-time and without a formal employment relationship.

Although observed in smaller numbers, there was a part (19) who declared to carry out non-agricultural activities, a phenomenon observed increasingly in the countryside, according to Carneiro (1998a; 2011) and Wanderley (2009). These authors highlight that occupations in the countryside have increased in non-agricultural services.

According to 2014 data from the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE-*Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos*), employment in rural areas has decreased. This phenomenon is considered a reflection of the transformations that the Brazilian countryside has been undergoing, such as the increase in land concentration and the mechanization of agricultural processes that consequently, reduces jobs. Between 2004 and 2013, the employed population in the Brazilian countryside fell from 4.9 million to 4.0 million. This reduction in the number of people with some work was accompanied by a decrease in the number of employers, a consequence of the increase in the concentration of land ownership. Concerning employment relationships, informality and illegality prevail (Dieese, 2014).

This reality was evident in the biographical trajectories of the young students. As highlighted, among the 76 students who declared having some occupation, only four students said they had a formal job (5.2%). Although they considered the Irrigation Perimeter a place with greater job opportunities – which was the reason their families had migrated to that location –, the majority of available positions were associated with banana cultivation or domestic work, generally performed without any social protection and with low pay.

## **BETWEEN BEING OR NOT BEING A PEASANT**

Despite the limitations of their life contexts, the young people developed strategies to overcome the challenges of living as young people, such as access to digital technologies and social networks. Even though many lived in areas without cell phone signals or internet access, practically all the young people had cell phones of various makes and models. Since the school provided Wi-Fi, it was rare for someone not to bring their device to access social networks, download videos or do some requested research. This reality made teaching activities with the young people even more challenging since the pedagogical work inevitably began to compete and dispute space for cell phones.

As previously stated, the diversity among the young people was evident. For example, it was possible to notice a difference in style when comparing the different shifts. Unlike the daytime students, the nighttime students preferred looser clothing and accessories. The girls opted for shorter, tighter clothing and hair dyed in bright, flashy colors. Young people of both genders preferred more upbeat music, such as funk. Many had already lived in other larger cities, with family members or even alone, which may explain this tendency.

Upon entering the school in the afternoon, the atmosphere was very different from the evening shift. The silence that took over the school was striking, perhaps due to the concentration of younger students, with less autonomy. They opted for a more discreet and traditional style. Only one student had a small tattoo and one wore earrings, a cap, and loose clothing.

Regarding their affiliation, 50% declared that they were children of farmers. By observing their styles, musical tastes, and behaviors, it was impossible to identify who came from farming families

or developed activities directly related to agriculture. In this sense, it is interesting to note that the social, economic, and cultural transformations of contemporary society have impacted the territory and the way of life of its residents. Without disregarding the need to reflect on their consequences, it is important to understand how such changes have affected young people for their identities and ways of being.

According to Wanderley (2001), the line separating the categories “urban” and “rural” is tenuous, although the elements that differentiate them are well specified theoretically. Thus, it becomes increasingly complex to classify some spaces, especially those located in small cities and districts where these elements intersect. This makes it difficult for some individuals and social groups to identify with a given territory. The research participants were divided between those who considered peasants and those who did not identify as such. Cultural hybridism and the increasing presence of services and consumer goods considered exclusive to urban spaces had direct implications for the construction of young people’s identities and how they were perceived as peasants or not.

Dayrell (1999) reveals that youth identity is a construction, a process in an age-biological demarcation, but also implies a strong relationship with sociocultural dimensions. The constitution of identity depends on the identification of others concerning oneself. As he states, there is a central element in the construction of identity, which is the relationship between the individual with himself and others, including the environment, from which people are formed and transformed.

Thus, the different reactions of the research participants to the issue of peasant belonging can be understood from this relational dimension of the processes of construction of individual identities highlighted by this author. The answers given reflected the complexity of the social experiences of contemporary young people in the countryside, which implies greater circulation through social spaces and increased access to information by the new generations, often mediated by information and communication technologies.

Based on the characteristics listed by Veiga (2004), it is possible to state that they lived in rural areas, even those who lived in villages. However, not all of them were recognized as peasants, although most called themselves peasants and recognized the space where they lived as a “rural area”. Some students, even though they lived on banana plots, did not consider themselves peasants. Others seemed to approach what Carneiro (1998b) classified as “rurban”, that is, a local mix between urban characteristics and elements of rural life. The latter considered themselves, at the same time, “from the city” and “a little peasant” or “from the countryside”.

How the young people perceived themselves about their territorial belonging was not fixed and definitive, which requires considering the various elements involved in these processes of constructing their identities. The testimonies highlighted three elements that imply the construction, affirmation, or denial of the young people's peasant identity.

One of these elements is work. The students’ statements referred to the centrality of work in agriculture as a socializing agency, especially within families. At the same time, when referring to work, the terms “heavy”, “difficult” and “which pays very little” were the references most often used to describe it. This led them to project, as an ideal for the future, the inclusion of activities outside the field.

Next, there is the school. There was a great distance between the experiences and ways of life in the countryside and the school institution – a form of organization, times, spaces, curricula, and pedagogical practices. Disregarding the discussion about Rural Education as an educational proposal, the school had little dialogue with the context of the young people and their sociocultural characteristics, making it difficult to construct meanings and significance for school activities other than certification and

accreditation for continuing studies. Thus, the ties with the school and the motivations to study were almost always fragile and extrinsic.

Although the school professionals were familiar with the frameworks of Rural Education, their contact with them was superficial. The theme of life in the countryside was still treated as something folkloric, in the form of event themes, especially on festive occasions and during school competitions. The analysis of the institution's Political Pedagogical Project also confirmed the lack of articulation of the experiences of living in the countryside as a central axis of its educational processes and a guiding principle for the school's organization and pedagogical practices. References to this issue in the document were limited to current legislation, which served as a mere formality to substantiate the proposal.

The students' reports expressed this lack of coordination, especially in agriculture work. They did not indicate aspects that were closer to the very foundation of Rural Education and their demands were more pragmatic, such as the demand that the school curriculum have subjects that would prepare students for carrying out agricultural activities. Even if in a specific way, this expresses the school's desire for dialogue with its experiences in that territory.

Finally, a third element refers to the experience lived in large cities. This was the case of two young people interviewed who did not identify as peasants, even though they lived in the countryside and worked in the fields. Among the students interviewed, they had been the only young people with experience of life in large cities and had constructed a negative image of the rural environment and work in the fields. In their statements, the idealized image of life in the city as a “promise of happiness” emerged. Both liked funk music and planned to live in the city. Those who had lived in smaller cities tended to identify more with the countryside. In turn, as we have seen, other young people saw themselves in a situation of hybrid belonging, that is, in some aspects, they felt urban and, in others, from the countryside. Through their statements, an image of the countryside is created as a “frontier space” (BHABHA, 1998), in the sense of the urban intersecting with the rural environment.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The great diversity of trajectories and life projects among the students participating in the research is highlighted. Depending on their social origin, individual and family trajectories, and racial, and gender affiliation, the representations of the experiences of being a young peasant varied, as did their identification with the territory and its place in future projects.

While the data reveal the social conditions in which the students of the school lived their youth, they also denounce the lack of public policies to ensure their rights. Until the State provides effective actions that support these young people, they and their families will take sole responsibility for their trajectories, being forced to become strong and “smart” to take advantage of the few opportunities that arise.

A central issue that emerged, especially from the participants' accounts, refers to the way they saw and represented life in the countryside, and their aspirations regarding whether to remain in that territory or migrate. Youth identities are formed from social and structural relations but from intersubjective and subjective ones. By expressing their (non)identification with life in the countryside, these young people expressed the challenges of building their life projects based on the schooling and work experiences that were offered to them in that context. They did not affirm a categorical denial of

peasant identity, but rather a desire to reconcile life in the countryside with better working conditions and education in their future choices.

These are fundamental questions and challenges for an educational perspective in tune with the lives of rural youth. Especially from a perspective of education as a right and an emancipatory pedagogical practice, it becomes essential to ask what place the school will occupy in opening up possibilities for the new generations living in/from the countryside.

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Author 2 - Supervision of the research, active participation in the development of the research instruments and data analysis, writing of the text, and review of the final version of the article.

#### **DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with this article.