

## The teacher made of rice: feeding and belonging among children from a rural school in Maranhão (Brazil)

*A professora de arroz: alimentação e pertencimento entre crianças em uma escola do campo no Maranhão*

*La profesora de arroz: alimentación y pertenencia entre niños en una escuela del campo en Maranhão (Brasil)*

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### ABSTRACT

The keynote of this article is the relation between feeding and belonging to the countryside, described by children from Dom Marcelino School. Using food language, the children build strategies of belonging, reinforcing their rural identity, opposing the agenda of their own school through its curriculum, teachers and practices. In the children's narratives there are the categories *school food* and *home food*, demonstrating a continuum in their diet at both places. Through the foods and the rhetoric created about them, the children get to solve traditional dichotomies like those engendered between home/farm and farm/school. This was revealed to us through observation, drawings and conversation circles, which were the methodological signposts of this research.


**Keywords:** Feeding. Belonging. Identity. Children. Rural School.


### RESUMO

O mote deste artigo é a relação tecida pelas crianças da escola Dom Marcelino entre a alimentação e o pertencimento ao campo. Por meio do idioma da comida as crianças criam estratégias de pertencimento, reforçando a sua identidade rural, na contramão do que faz a própria escola, por meio de seu currículo, suas docentes e suas práticas. As narrativas das crianças transitam pelas categorias *comida da escola e comida de casa*, demonstrando um *continuum* na dieta alimentar de ambos os lugares. Por meio dos alimentos e da retórica que constroem sobre eles, elas conseguem diluir dicotomias clássicas como aquelas engendradas entre casa/roçado e roçado/escola. Isso nos foi revelado pela observação dos desenhos e das rodas de conversas, guias metodológicos desta pesquisa.

**Palavras-chave:** Alimentação. Pertencimento. Identidade. Crianças. Escola do Campo.

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## RESUMEN

El lema de este artículo es la relación hecha por niños de la Escuela Dom Marcelino entre alimentación y la pertenencia al campo. A través del idioma de la comida, los niños crean estrategias de pertenencia, reforzando su identidad rural, en el contramano de lo que se hace en la propia escuela, por medio de su plan de estudios, sus docentes y sus prácticas. Los relatos de los niños transitan por las categorías comida-de-la-escuela y comida-de-casa, demostrando un contínuum en el régimen alimentario de ambos lugares. Por medio de las comidas y de la retórica que construyen sobre estas, los niños consiguen romper con dicotomías tradicionales como aquellas engendradas entre casa/segado y segado/escuela. Eso nos fue revelado a través de la observación, de los dibujos y de las ruedas de conversaciones, guías metodológicos de esta investigación.

**Palabras clave:** Alimentación. Pertenencia. Identidad. Niños. Escuela del Campo.

## BACKGROUND

This article is based on research conducted among children at Dom Marcelino School (Escola Municipal Dom Marcelino — EDM), located in the village of Coquelândia, on Estrada do Arroz,<sup>1</sup> Imperatriz, state of Maranhão. The aim of the research was to analyze the role of children in the curriculum of this early childhood education institution, with a focus on the specific needs of rural children. During the initial surveys, an unexpected phenomenon was observed: nearly all attempts at conversation, socialization, and engaging with the children led to discussions about food. These findings compelled us to explore why food was such a significant topic of conversation for them.

Why did the children's answers to general questions about the settings, the people, and school activities always refer to food? Why did they use food as a language to communicate with the researchers? It appeared that, in informal conversations, discussion circles, and drawings, food was a recurring theme, suggesting that the children used it as a language to interpret the world. We needed to understand what these narratives were conveying to us.

Throughout the research, it became clear that, despite being located *in* the countryside, the school could not be classified as a school *of* the countryside. The lack of connection to rural identity was evident in the discourse of the teaching staff and school personnel, the curriculum, the teaching strategies employed, the classroom content, and even the school infrastructure. In every aspect, EDM seemed to seek recognition as an almost urban institution.

However, children are social actors whose creativity, autonomy, and agency must be recognized (Sousa, 2018). Despite the school's dynamics and the efforts of other agents to deny them any rural identity, the children employed a strategy to assert and mark their belonging to the countryside: feeding. Thus, rather than merely using food as a lens to understand the world, as we initially thought, the children used it as a way of being in the world, of affirming a rural identity, and of claiming their sense of belonging. In this way, every narrative from the children, intertwined with references to food, ultimately connected them to their families, the land, and the community: their place of origin, the countryside.

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1 Estrada do Arroz [Rice Road], MA-386, received its name due to the significant rice production that occurred there between the 1950s and 1970s, after rural workers fleeing agrarian conflicts arrived in the region in search of land. During this period, Imperatriz was experiencing the rice cycle, creating the Agricultural Corridor with record production on the Estrada do Arroz. The road, which provides access to several villages, was neglected by the authorities for over 40 years and was only paved in 2016 (Pantoja and Pereira, 2019).

This article explores the relationship between feeding and belonging as expressed by children from EDM in Coquelândia. Through the language of food, these children create strategies of belonging and reinforce their rural identity, in contrast to the school's curriculum and practices. They use food to express their connection to the countryside, their families, the land, and a rural way of life, thereby resisting the school's persistent attempts to deny them the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging to their place of origin.

The title of this article comes from a statement made by a child who, in response to the teacher and everything she represents — the school, the system, the political-pedagogical project, the curriculum, and control —, as well as the denial of a rural identity inherent in these elements, emphatically declared that “the teacher is made of rice”. This reaction highlights the children's agency and ability to construct different meanings and a sense of belonging beyond those imposed by adults.

This article is structured as follows: in the first part, we introduce EDM and outline the methodological approach of the research. The second part presents the theoretical framework used to analyze children's experiences with food at school, highlighting its relevance as a field of study. In the third part, we reflect on the data gathered from conversations with children and participant observation, explaining the process that led to the conclusions of this research.

The present article is an excerpt of the investigations conducted by the Center for Studies in State, Public Policies, and Democracy (*Núcleo de Estudos em Estado, Políticas Públicas e Democracia* — NEEPED) as part of the undergraduate pedagogy program and the professional master's degree in education (PPGFOPRED). It aimed to contribute to the fields of education and child anthropology, focusing on discussions about identity, food, belonging, schools, and rural childhoods.

## THE SCHOOL AND ITS SUBJECTS

EDM serves 86 children, divided into the following groups: nursery I and II, and kindergarten I and II. Children from kindergarten II, kindergarten I, and nursery II were selected for this research. This choice was based on the fact that these groups consist of children aged three to five years old, who have already developed oral communication skills.

In terms of infrastructure, the school offers a reasonably adequate physical space compared to other early childhood education facilities in the municipal rural public network of Imperatriz. Although the building is old, it provides a conducive environment for effective pedagogical activities by teachers. The institution includes the following facilities: a school office, a teachers' room, four classrooms, a multifunctional resource room for specialized education services (SES), two bathrooms adapted for children and one toilet for adults, a covered patio that serves as a cafeteria, a kitchen with a sink and pantry, a principal's office, a covered circulation area, an open outdoor space, and a multi-sports court.

Regarding spaces for children's meals, the school features two distinct areas: a covered patio that serves as a cafeteria and a kitchen. The cafeteria is small, clean, and organized, equipped with several sets of tables and chairs, and a drinking fountain from which children can freely pour water, either with or without the assistance of teachers. The kitchen is divided into two sections: the food preparation area, which includes an industrial stove, a small counter for serving snacks, and a wall cabinet for storing utensils; and the hygiene area, which has a sink and a refrigerator. Notably, the plates and cups used during meals are made of glass, and the spoons are made of stainless steel. This indicates that the management team is attentive to the hygiene and quality of the meals, as plastic utensils, commonly used in schools and family settings, do not always provide the same level of hygiene assurance. On the other hand, this setup also highlights the need for training children, starting from the age of three, to use these utensils safely and effectively.

In the external facilities, the school features a free, wooded area with fruit trees that is frequently used by children and teachers for playtime. During recess, it is common for the manager to distribute toys and equipment for recreational activities. The school also has a multi-sports court, which is often used for events and meetings with families. However, it is rarely used by the children due to the strong sunlight that affects the court for most of the day.

The school serves children from the village and nearby farms. Notably, these children are predominantly Black and Brown. Their families derive income from public service, animal husbandry, and subsistence farming, and many are registered in income transfer programs such as the Family Grant Program (*Programa Bolsa Família* — PBF). Additionally, a small portion of the community works for a paper and cellulose multinational that established operations in the region less than a decade ago, resulting in significant social, cultural, and economic impacts (Pantoja and Pereira, 2019).

## THE RESEARCH ROAD

Research with children in Brazil has emphasized their creative power, agency, and protagonism. Researchers such as Nunes (2002), Tassinari (2012), and Sousa (2014) have focused on studying children not just as subjects but as active agents, paying close attention to their agency and roles in various contexts.

The subjects of this research are children between three and five years old, commonly referred to as young children. This requires careful methodological consideration due to both ethical concerns (Kramer, 2002; Alderson, 2005; Barbosa, 2014; Fernandes, 2016) and the adaptation of techniques typically used with adults. It is crucial to account for the unique aspects of conducting research with young children when selecting methods and employing techniques and instruments.

Having defined the main focus of the research, an analysis of children's representations of the curriculum, a qualitative method with a sensitive listening approach was employed (Goldberg and Frota, 2017). The techniques used included informal conversations, oral narratives, and drawings, all involving direct observation. These methods highlighted the central role of food in the children's speech, whether through conversations or drawings. Using this set of techniques, we generated the data analyzed in this article — which is a section of a larger research project. We focused on how children incorporate food into their narratives as a means of asserting their rural identity. To understand the interactions between the teaching staff and the institution and to assess how the school integrates (or not) with the rural context, we also conducted interviews with teachers and school managers.

Regarding the researchers' integration into the field, initial negotiations were conducted with the school manager, followed by discussions with the teaching staff to present the research objectives. Subsequently, a meeting was held with the children's parents. The parents, teachers, and manager all signed the Informed Consent. After developing the research instruments, we integrated ourselves into the children's daily school life and began to build social relationships with them. The initial discomfort and shyness typical of the presence of strangers quickly evolved into relationships of intimacy and trust between the researchers and the children.

From the perspective of sensitive listening, we explored children's representations through oral narratives recorded in audio and video. Oral narratives were selected as they provide deeper insights into children's perceptions and are considered primary sources of their representations (Ferrarotti, 2010). Allowing the children to speak freely (and draw!) enabled us to focus on the role of food in their narratives, something that might not have emerged through structured interviews based on key themes or controlled drawings.

The children's real names were used in this work, adhering to the anthropological principle that children are full agents in deciding their representation in ethnographic texts (Sousa and Pires, 2020). This approach is particularly relevant when their appearance in the texts — through their names, photos, or signatures on their drawings — does not harm them.

The conversation circles were held outdoors, under a tree in front of the school. This choice was made to separate research activities from school tasks, helping to avoid any confusion that children might have between researchers and teachers, and ensuring that the research activities were not perceived as part of school assessments.

Photographic and video cameras as well as voice recorders were used as research instruments. The placement of recorders on tables at a distance from the children helped them feel at ease. The choice of conversation circles (Moura and Lima, 2014) is supported by Pires and Santos (2019), who argue that research methods with children should integrate various aspects, especially when working with young children and incorporating drawings (Toren, 1993; Cohn, 2006; 2008; Tassinari 2015; 2016; Müller and Dutra, 2018).

Therefore, the children were asked to draw the school and its contents using the thematic drawing technique (Sousa and Pires, 2021). Then, guiding questions were posed based on the research objectives and design. During the research, we observed that the children were more verbal while drawing than after finishing their drawings. As a result, one of the researchers engaged in conversation with the children about their drawings and the meanings they attributed to them in relation to the school. This approach underscores the importance of combining the drawing process with dialogue, with the analysis focusing on what was said and the meanings the children assigned (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Gobbi, 2012; Sarmiento and Trevisan, 2017).

We recognize that children in this age group tend to provide fragmented, brief, and specific responses, making traditional interviews challenging (Sousa, 2015). However, when combined with other research techniques, informal conversations prove to be highly effective. Despite using pre-prepared guiding questions, the children introduced elements and narratives with unexpected themes. As a result, conversations were steered to gain a deeper understanding of these themes. This approach allowed us to uncover how children use food to delineate their rural identity, revealing insights that went beyond our initial hypotheses for the investigation.

## RURALITIES, FEEDING, AND BELONGING

Rural has traditionally been defined in opposition to urban, often as a dichotomy. It has been suggested that the countryside and the city should be viewed as a continuum rather than as separate categories. Historically considered opposites, the countryside and the city are involved in ongoing debates over their meanings across various fields of knowledge, making it impossible to simplify this reality. Predictions of the end of rural areas have arisen due to urbanization and industrialization processes affecting many rural communities. In this context, schools in rural areas might be seen as mechanisms to facilitate exodus and migration, representing pathways for leaving the countryside, which is often viewed as a place of primitiveness, backwardness, and lack of civilization.

Other perspectives have highlighted the transformations of the countryside under the influence of urbanization and industrialization as manifestations of new ruralities (Wanderley, 2009). These perspectives reveal the evolving dynamics of rural life and its capacity for transformation. Categories such as rurban (Carneiro, 1998) have been developed to describe rural communities increasingly influenced by urban logic, illustrating how “the countryside can also be understood as a place where families produce their livelihood and recreate ways of life in continuity with or in tension with prevailing urban patterns” (Silva, Silva and Martins, 2013, p. 15). Additionally, the concept of

imaginary cities (Veiga, 2002) helps to demonstrate how Brazil classifies numerous communities as cities, even though many aspects of these communities are essentially rural.

Due to the perception of the countryside as archaic, lacking technology or future prospects, some social actors reject any connection with rural areas. This is evident at EDM, where there is no development of a rural identity, and teachers actively deny any connection to the rural environment. This denial is reflected in their classroom strategies and dynamics. Throughout the study, this denial emerged through interviews with teachers and the school manager. Consequently, teachers attempt to create a separation between the school and its rural location, as well as between the school and the children's place of origin.<sup>2</sup>

The reality is that there is not just one type of countryside, but a diversity of rural environments and ways of experiencing rural life. Similarly, there is not just one concept of childhood, but multiple childhoods as varied as the rural contexts in which they are situated (Sousa, 2010). As noted, "both children are subjected to general processes that shape their experience of their historical moment, and rural areas also undergo forces that tend to homogenize them" (Silva, Silva and Martins, 2013, p. 17). This dialectic between the general and the local, the countryside and the city, the urban and the rural, defines rural childhoods.

Despite the attempts of some of the social actors that make up EDM to deny it a rural school identity, thanks to the ability to resist, re-signify and transform the realities in which they are inserted, the children chose a way of demarcating their belonging to the countryside in a space where everything denies it: through feeding intervention.

Research on PBF and resource management by families under the influence of children highlights a strong connection between children and food (Pires, 2013; Nascimento and Amoras, 2017). Sousa's (2016) study in the backlands of Paraíba similarly shows that a peasant identity and Capuxu ethnicity are constructed through children's relationship with food. The importance of a specific diet plays a crucial role in shaping the body, personhood, and identity of these communities, particularly during childhood.

While children's diets in cities often revolve around more industrialized foods, such as *brebotes* and *buringangas* (Benjamin, 2010; Pires and Jardim, 2014), in the countryside, their diets are more closely connected to foods associated with the land. At the school on Estrada do Arroz, children frequently refer to these rural foods, reinforcing their connection to their rural communities. While industrialized foods do exist among them, it is notable that rural foods are prioritized in their conversations.

The school menu at EDM primarily consists of rural foods, purchased by the Municipal Secretariat of Education (*Secretaria Municipal de Educação* — SEMED) and delivered to the school. We noted the presence of seasonal fruits and vegetables, along with meals typical of rural areas. As a result, the lunch served at EDM stands out as the only aspect where the school's connection to rural life is acknowledged and legitimized by the school system itself.

At EDM, despite this being a school located in a rural area, there is a noticeable lack of identification with the countryside. The school's political-pedagogical project (PPP), curriculum, and the discourse and practices of the teaching staff all reflect a denial of any connection to rural life,<sup>3</sup>

2 It is also necessary to consider the school as a place of boundaries, as Tassinari (2001) did in relation to indigenous schools, as a meeting point between the Amerindian and Western worlds. In some rural communities, the school can also appear as a boundary between the rural and urban, which seems to be the case here.

3 Although a study on the role/influence of municipal management, through SEMED, on teaching practices was not conducted, it can be assumed that the autonomy of the teachers in the researched institution is likely constrained by SEMED's pedagogical guidelines, such as the imposition of a pre-established curriculum, including textbooks and projects that limit teachers' autonomy. This is because these guidelines move away from the interests and specificities, knowledge, and experiences of rural individuals and align more with an urban-based educational ideal. On the other hand, the inadequacy of teacher training for rural education may also undermine the possibilities for resistance and autonomy of the researched teachers in the face of established power dynamics.



with ongoing efforts to align more closely with urban identities. However, the children's conversations often highlight a typically rural diet, positioning the school as a significant place for fostering a sense of belonging to a rural identity through food.

Why does the school emerge as a privileged place for discussing food? Why do the children's conversations center around what they eat, who prepares the food (such as "the girl who makes the snack"), the spaces (such as the kitchen), and the times (such as recess) associated with their meals? To explore these questions, the work of several anthropological authors who explore the potential relationship between food and identity will be briefly examined.

## FEEDING AND IDENTITY

The anthropological dimension of food involves its symbolic aspects, including habits, traditions, representations, rites, and taboos. Anthropology demonstrates that, even in situations of poverty, food reflects the identity of a social group and its representations (Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2006). Food frequently serves as a marker of identity and regional distinction.

Klaas Woortmann argues that "food has a symbolic meaning; it talks about something more than nutrients, it talks about the family, about men and women, about their history and culture" (Woortmann, 1978, p. 40). Similarly, Fischler (1995) suggests that individuals become what they eat, underscoring the importance of the symbolic value of food. According to him, humans "eat meanings" and, in the act of eating, share a vast array of representations with their peers.

Food acts as a form of language, as Woortmann (2013, p. 06) noted. According to the author, there is "a close relationship between the perception of food and the body". Fischler (1995) supports this idea by suggesting that food is transformed into the body itself. We believe this relationship extends further, intertwining food, the body, the individual, and the identity of a group. Sousa (2016) illustrated this with the Capuxu people, who consume roots to infuse their bodies with the strength of the earth.

Like Woortmann (2013), we believe that food — beyond nourishing the biological body — nourishes the social body, carrying a symbolic dimension. It represents a system of codes that reflects the social organization of a people (Wedig and Menasche, 2008). In this sense, food sustains both bodies and representations, as when the children at EDM talk about food, they also discuss themes of belonging, work, family, community, and identity.

Rodrigues (2006) examines the body as a canvas for signs, suggesting that it has a hunger for the signs conveyed through the food it consumes. DaMatta (1984) argued that, while society expresses itself through various languages and mirrors, food is one of the most significant codes in Brazilian society, alongside politics, economics, family, space, and time. He distinguishes between food and nourishment: "Food is everything that can be ingested to keep a person alive; nourishment is everything that is eaten with pleasure, in accordance with the rules of communion and commensality" (DaMatta, 1984, p. 55). We concur that both food and the act of eating reveal much about a particular culture and society. As Menasche (2005) notes, we are what we eat, highlighting the strong connection between diet and the creation of identity or a sense of belonging.

Lévi-Strauss (2004) illustrated how the states of food (whether raw or cooked) serve as a means to classify things, people, and even moral actions. The food of a society and the act of eating reveal much about its worldview and classification system. Through metaphor, we can gain valuable insights into the social life of a group by examining their cuisine. Indeed, the cuisine of a social group is a reflection of its identity and belonging.

According to Amon and Menasche (2008, p. 13), food is a narrative: "a community can manifest emotions, systems of belonging, meanings, social relations, and its collective identity in food". They propose that if food serves as a voice that communicates, it has the capacity to tell stories.

Consequently, food and eating practices can form a narrative of a community's social memory. Since memory is fundamental to the construction of identity, food can play a role in shaping and expressing a people's identity.

According to Woodward (2000), the kitchen exemplifies how identity and difference are marked through symbolic systems, as it embodies cultural elements unique to each people or individual. Identity is considered relational, meaning it is constructed in contrast to what is perceived as different. This reflects the tendency to use one's own characteristics as the standard for evaluating or describing what is different.

According to Silva (2000), identity gains meaning through language and symbolic systems. Therefore, the construction of identity is both symbolic and social. Societies use classifications and hierarchies to organize reality, including through their food practices. The menu or diet of a people serves as a significant guide for these classifications and symbols, as noted by Woortmann (1978) and Brandão (1981).

For Leach (1974), food reveals much about individual identity and the surrounding culture. More than just sustenance, food is a means by which people can express their identities, affiliations, and cultural belonging.

According to Fischler (1995), food embodies the "Principle of Incorporation," meaning that, when we eat, we not only absorb its physical matter and nutrients but also the entire network of cultural meanings and social conventions associated with it. Society dictates what is considered food, when it should be consumed, and the significance attributed to it.

It appears that there is a gap in the literature regarding the intersection of children's experiences with food from a socio-anthropological perspective. Most existing studies focus on school meals within educational or sociological contexts (Bezerra, 2009; Freitas *et al.*, 2013) or explore children as consumers of fast food in media and consumption studies. However, there is a lack of ethnographic research that delves into how children navigate and express their identities and sense of belonging through their interactions with food. This gap suggests a need for more in-depth studies that explore the socio-anthropological dimensions of children's food practices and their implications for identity and belonging.

In this article, we examine how children at EDM use food as a medium to express and assert their rural identity and sense of belonging. Despite the school staff's denial of the rural character of the institution, the children manage to infuse elements of rural life and ethos into their school experience. They achieve this through their discussions about food, the narratives they construct around it, and the connections they make between their school meals and their rural origins.

In rural contexts, the diet is crucial for providing the strength, determination, and courage necessary for labor, fundamental to the peasant way of life (Cândido, 2003). For this reason, the diets of children and adults are confused so that there is no clear transition from one diet to another, but much more from one way of eating to the other, or commensality (Sousa, 2016). Like everything that happens in the countryside, where the universes of children and adults are intertwined, the diet is also entangled in these two dimensions.

## REFERRING TO FEEDING AS A WAY OF BUILDING BELONGING

EDM may offer limited appeal for children due to its predominantly traditional pedagogical approach, which aligns with a banking model of education (Freire, 1987) that lacks stimulation for the development of autonomy or active participation in daily classroom activities. Observations indicate that students frequently lack the opportunity to speak in class, often facing repression from their teachers. In this context, recess becomes a crucial period for children, as it provides them with a chance to socialize and exercise their right to speak with peers and researchers.



From the language used around food, many insights can be gained. Over time, we observed how children discussed *school food* in relation to their *home food*, reflecting a continuity between the diets of both environments, after all, both — home and school — are part of the same reality, the rural setting. Consequently, children’s narratives transitioned from *school food* to *home food*, creating connections between the two and illustrating the genuine relationship between home and school. While home is consciously rooted in a rural identity, the school, though situated in the countryside, does not fully embrace this connection. It serves as a gateway to the countryside, operating as a rural school without fully belonging to that identity.

The teachers noted in their reports that parents expressed a desire to send their children to the city, arguing that students who study in Imperatriz are a source of pride for the community and exemplify those who have “moved up in life”. This perspective highlights not only a lack of integration between the children and the school but also a disconnect between the school and the countryside. The discourse reveals a guiding belief that children should study to eventually leave their current setting.

Because there are things we need to improve, but in terms of information and the way of working, it’s fine. I don’t think it needs to be any different from the urban area. After all, our children will grow up, become adults, and will eventually leave here and face a reality that doesn’t need to be so different from what they have already experienced here. (Teacher, interview in 2018)

In several respects, EDM identifies itself as urban, one of which is its infrastructure, which is considered superior to that of rural schools in general. This aligns with the standards of city schools, particularly after a recent renovation that has become a source of pride for teachers and coordinators alike.

In the statements of several teachers, expressions such as “this little country life” reflect a view of the rural setting as limiting and express a desire for children to move away from there. During the research, the teaching staff demonstrated this attitude through their practices. They often used materials geared toward city environments that were disconnected from the children’s reality, frequently criticizing the students and disregarding content related to the local context. By employing teaching materials and methodologies similar to those used in urban schools, teachers aim to prepare children for migration, a concern evident in the teachers’ statements rather than the children’s own perspectives.

We observed various ways in which the school failed to integrate with the rural environment. Teachers not only repressed content related to rural areas but also used materials provided by SEMED, which are urban-focused and irrelevant to rural contexts.<sup>4</sup> This reveals a challenge in connecting the school with the environment to which both the children and the school itself belong. During the research, we came across a situation where children engaged in play by imitating animals common to their rural reality: cows, horses, oxen, goats. When confronted with this, the teacher severely reprimanded them. Instead of guiding the play with an educational purpose, she interrupted and prohibited the children from continuing, offering an alternative game that was typically urban.

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4 As a prerogative of the National Common Curricular Base (*Base Nacional Comum Curricular* — BNCC), the state of Maranhão developed the Maranhão Territorial Curricular Document (*Documento Curricular do Território Maranhense* — DCTMA, 2019), which emphasizes “Maranhense identity” as the central axis of teaching. This document is intended to guide teachers in promoting students’ identity formation across the state. The goal is to direct the construction of curricula that respect regional cultural peculiarities, allowing each city to work with the reality and dialogue of its popular culture, whether in rural or urban areas. However, in practice, this document does not address the intangible culture of the different regions and municipalities within the state, which is why SEMED does not adopt it.

The rhetoric of the teachers and manager, during the interviews, dismisses the village as rural and contends that the community is merely a neighborhood in the city of Imperatriz:

Everyone here has an urban life. Everyone lives an urban life. Rural education is over. The countryside is over. We're in a neighborhood in Imperatriz. (...) I really want these children to have an actual urban life. I mean, we are neither rural nor urban, then why not have an urban life? Let's choose one. If it's a neighborhood, let's live up to the neighborhood. (Manager, interview in 2018)

In interviews and conversations with teachers and managers, we observed that their statements reflect a strong identification with urban life. They advocate for a pedagogy *in* the countryside, but not one that is *of* the countryside. Their narratives reveal an alignment with city-based education, asserting that the curriculum and teaching materials used in urban schools are superior to those in rural schools.

We now understand that the rejection of rural identity is not confined to the school itself but extends to the broader attitudes of the school agents. These individuals not only deny the rural nature of their own environment but also seek to have their community recognized as a neighborhood of Imperatriz, despite this not aligning with the municipality's official classification. When preparing the research project, we requested a list of rural schools from SEMED and selected EDM, located in the village of Coquelândia, which is recognized as a rural area within the municipality.

Historically, the right to education has been denied to the poorest social strata of the Brazilian population, leading to struggles "for an education that respects and addresses the needs of rural communities, who have been most affected by educational exclusion" (Furtado, 2004, p. 45). However, efforts to develop educational policies or specific pedagogical projects for rural areas often overlooked the perspectives of rural individuals (Caldart, 2004). As a result, the educational dimension of rural social movements has emerged, characterized by a lack of projects that offer the necessary contributions to promote and value the diverse subjects forming the "countryside" identity (Arroyo, 2008). Engaging with rural children allows for the creation of early childhood education that connects their experiences and identities to the rural environment. This approach fosters an education that "helps children understand how their community names the world, celebrates, sings, dances, tells stories, and produces and prepares food" (Silva, Pasuch and Silva, 2012, p. 1).

As social scientists, we understand that the formation of identity involves a sense of belonging for individuals. In this research, our primary focus is on children, as their perspectives and perceptions are of central interest to us. Despite the narratives of the teaching staff and the school manager, the children express and reinforce their sense of belonging to the countryside through their food-related narratives within the school environment.

While the teachers claimed that this was not a rural area but a neighborhood in the city of Imperatriz, the children's drawings on the theme "My School" revealed their connection to the countryside through depictions of local foods. Recognizing the significance of discussing the children's drawings with them, researchers engaged in conversations based on the elements the children presented, even if these discussions diverged from the primary research objectives.

**Researcher:** Alright, let's start drawing then. Henrique is finishing up his drawing. What are you doing, Henrique? What's that?

**Henrique:** An apple.

**Researcher:** Do you like apples? Where do you eat apples?

**Henrique:** On the farm.

**Researcher:** Do they have apples on the farm?

**Sophia:** My grandma goes there too.

**Researcher:** She goes to the farm? What's there on the farm?

**Henrique:** Cassava.

**Researcher:** Cassava is really good.

**Henrique:** Watermelon, pumpkin.

**Researcher:** Pumpkin, how tasty. What else is on the farm?

**(Children from Nursery School II – morning)**

Henrique mentioned drawing an apple and noted that he enjoys eating it in the farm, despite the fact that Maranhão's lands are not suitable for growing the fruit. He also highlighted the cassava tree, watermelon, and pumpkin as elements commonly found in the rural environment. Additionally, he shared that his grandmother also goes to the farm, indicating that farm work involves all family members. This reveals the intergenerational nature of life in the countryside, encompassing work and daily activities both at home and in the fields.

**Henrique:** Every day my grandpa goes to the farm.

**Researcher:** Really? Does he take you along? That's nice. What do you do there?

**Henrique:** Make cassava.

**Researcher:** Is that so? And who makes the cassava at home?

**Henrique:** Mom!

**Researcher:** How do you eat the cassava, boiled or fried?

**Henrique:** Boiled.

**Henrique and Sophia:** In the food.

**Researcher:** And what do you eat here at school?

**Henrique:** Rice and meat.

**Sophia:** Watermelon.

**Researcher:** Watermelon too? What did you have for a snack today?

**Kids:** Watermelon.

**(Children from Nursery School II – morning)**

Henrique continued the conversation with the researcher, emphasizing the involvement of his grandfather and grandmother in farming activities and reaffirming that cassava is a crop grown there. When asked about the presence of cassava in the school meals, the children denied its inclusion, stating that the school serves "rice and meat". They also mentioned that watermelon had been offered as a snack that day.

In anthropological literature, tubers like cassava are often classified as strong foods as opposed to weak ones. According to Klaas Woortmann (1978), a common classification in food systems is the distinction between strong and weak foods, which reflects the perceived relationship between food and the body that consumes it. Peasants have well-defined ethnic dietary patterns by which they classify different types of food. For the people of Maranhão, both in cities and the countryside, rice is considered a strong food that provides strength to the body.

Woortmann and Woortmann (1997) observed among settlers in Sergipe that men are associated with hard work because they are considered strong. As a result, being strong, men require strong food, particularly tubers or roots, which are regarded as food for labor. Sousa (2016) illustrated that among the Capuxu people, strong food is recommended for everyone, including children, who need energy to play. This food serves as the foundation for building a strong body in Capuxu culture. The understanding is that the energy children use for play will later be transformed into energy for work as adults. This classification of strong *versus* weak food was also highlighted in Brandão's (1981) study of the farmers of Mossamedes, where strong food is defined as food that provides sustenance, or, in other words, food that creates a feeling of satiety.

In rural communities, food holds a central place in the worldview, largely due to its close relationship with the land, which is the alma mater of rural life and its reality. This significance is reflected in the way children in these communities relate to food at school, highlighting the importance given to food in peasant cultures.

**Researcher:** That's right. What else is at your school, Tayla? Tell me.

**Tayla:** A kitchen.

**Researcher:** Alana, what is there at your school?

**Alana:** There's a tree.

**Researcher:** What's inside your tree?

**Alana:** There's a tree, toys, and a kitchen.

**Researcher:** Is there anything else, Kylsang? What would make this school really cool?

**Kylsang:** Playing kitchen, having a stove.

**Yasmin:** I have a little stove, a microwave, a sink, and a refrigerator and a little stove.

**Researcher:** At your house?

**Yasmin:** Yes!

**Researcher:** And here, what do you play?

**Yasmin:** Train, running.

**Kylsang:** Having snacks.

**(Children in the second period – afternoon)**

As observed earlier, the researcher initiates a new conversation to encourage the children to discuss what is present at school. Once again, elements, instruments, and spaces related to eating come to the forefront, even when the topic of conversation involves playing. When the researcher asks what the children play at school, Kylsang responds, "snacking". After discussing aspects of the food world, the children begin to talk about the circulation of food, as well as the concepts of gifting and reciprocity.

In the children's discussions, food serves as an instrument of socialization and a gift, as described by Mauss (2003). This is evident in the circulation of food:

**Kylsang:** Yasmin eats Maria Eduarda's snack all the time.

**Tayla:** It's because Maria Eduarda gives it to her.

**Researcher:** But is it the snack from school?

**Tayla:** No, sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't.

**Researcher:** Is it from home?

**Alana:** Yes, I bring it so Maria Eduarda doesn't feel hungry.

**Tayla:** Alana lets Maria Eduarda eat her snack.

**(Children in the second period – afternoon)**

**Researcher:** What else? Are there snacks at school?

**Sophia:** Yes.

*[Compliment on the drawing João Lucas showed]*

**Researcher:** What else is there at school?

**Henrique:** There are cookies.

**Henrique:** Chocolate cookies and crackers.

**Researcher:** What else?

**Rebeca:** The girl who makes snacks.

**Researcher:** Larissa, what's there at your school?

**Larissa:** Candy.

**Researcher:** What's that?

**Larissa:** Crandy.

**Researcher:** Candy?

**Larissa:** Yes.

**Researcher:** What's at your school, Valentina?

**Valentina:** [*Shows the drawing*] This.

**Researcher:** What is that?

**Valentina:** A school thing.

**Researcher:** What kind of thing? I don't know it, explain it to me.

**Valentina:** Yes, it was.

**Researcher:** Tell me, Laura, what's in your drawing?

**Laura:** [*Puts the drawing on the table*] There's a lowllipop.

**Laura:** Lowllipop.

**Researcher:** What's that?

**Rebeca:** Lollipop.

**Researcher:** Lollipop! There's a lollipop, a teacher, a snack lady. What else is there at this school? Tell me, guys.

**(Children from Nursery School II – Morning)**

Authors such as Benjamin (2010) and Pires and Jardim (2014) analyzed the use of PBF money by children in a small town in the backlands of Paraíba and found that spending on food is a priority. They noted that children also prioritize food and categorized their choices into two native terms: *brebotos* and *burigangas*, defined by the authors as children's foods. *Brebotos* is a regional term referring to delicious foods with low nutritional value, while *burigangas* is a variation of trinkets, meaning objects or things of little value. Pires (2013) further researched the unexpected effects of PBF in the semi-arid northeast, particularly regarding children's nutrition. With the increase in family consumption, one notable consequence of the program was the acquisition of children's foods previously considered luxuries, such as cookies, yogurt, soft drinks, chocolate milk, and sweets in general.

The children's narratives showed that references to industrialized foods are less frequent compared to references to country foods, which are abundant. For example, in the school yard, there is an acerola tree, and, during recess, children often pick the ripe acerolas and eat them as a snack.

According to Zaluar (1985), food serves not only as a powerful symbol of social prestige and wealth but also as a category that delineates boundaries between the poor and those who are not, thereby reinforcing social class identity. Consequently, food can be a significant marker distinguishing between countryside and city, rural and urban, home and school. At times, these domains may intersect, while, at other times, they may remain separate.

**Researcher:** What's cool about this school?

**Larissa:** Snack time.

**Laura:** Eating.

**Researcher:** What else is cool about this school?

**Gabriel:** Beans.

**Researcher:** And you, João Miguel, what did you draw? [*pause*] What did you draw? [*João Miguel shows the drawing*] What is it?

**João Miguel:** It's the thing!

**Researcher:** What thing? Tell me its name.

**Laura:** It could be... um...

**Researcher:** It could be what?

Laura: It could be a grape. And it could be bunchens of grapes.

**Researcher:** What's there at this school, Elisa? Tell me.

Elisa: Lots of food.

**Researcher:** What?

Elisa: Food.

**Researcher:** What else?

Elisa: Aaand, and rice. And snacks. Lots of stuff.

**Researcher:** What's the coolest thing about this school, Elisa?

Elisa: The food, toys, lots of things.

**(Children from Nursery School II – Morning)**

Another aspect to consider is that children in the morning shift mentioned food more frequently when describing school compared to those in the afternoon shift. This discrepancy relates to how meals are classified and prioritized in the countryside, further connecting food at school with a sense of belonging to the rural environment. In rural areas, meals such as breakfast, lunch, and dinner are considered essential because they consist of foods with more substance, or, as described in local terms, "*sustança*" (Brandão, 1981; Cândido, 2003; Woortmann, 2013).

In Maranhão, rice is commonly regarded as the food that provides power and strength, possessing "*sustança*". It is served in generous portions on Maranhão's plates. Maranhão, being the largest rice producer in the Northeast and the third largest in Brazil, underscores the significance of this grain. Rice is cultivated in 212 of the 217 municipalities in the state (EMBRAPA, 2013). This means that only five municipalities do not engage in rice production, which highlights the social, cultural, and economic value of rice for the people of Maranhão. Socially, it plays a crucial role in food security, while economically, it offers substantial income generation potential.

At school, we observed that children preferred lunch on days when rice was served, a preference more common among those in the morning shift who had access to lunch. Children in the morning shift are at school during a time that would otherwise be allocated for breakfast or lunch at home. Consequently, morning meals at school reflect foods that would typically be present at lunch, highlighting the importance of the snacks that occurs between these two significant meals.<sup>5</sup>

For the afternoon shift, since children return home after lunch and leave school before dinner, the school provides a lighter or less filling snack. This is because the snack is not intended to replace any of the main meals of rural life, particularly due to the absence of rice. Nonetheless, children in the morning shift consistently mentioned food on various topics covered by the researchers.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research experience with EDM children on Estrada do Arroz reveals an intriguing finding. Despite the traditional dichotomy in rural sociology that contrasts home and field, children bridge these two spaces through their discussions about food from both locations at school, effectively transforming the school into a borderland (Tassinari, 2001). Consequently, children talk about food from their origins in the countryside: home and the farm.

Our initial analysis of field data suggested that the children's discussions primarily addressed issues of food (in)security and poverty. However, as the children indicated that many foods were cultivated in backyards, it became clear that there was more to their discourse on food than merely hunger or poverty. The recurring focus on food in their representations of school highlighted a deeper relationship between school and food, a connection that has been emphasized by other authors.

<sup>5</sup> Freitas *et al.* (2013), in an intriguing study conducted in schools in Bahia, focused on adolescents' perceptions of foods deemed appropriate or inappropriate for school meals, using categories such as "food in place" and "food out of place".



Several studies have highlighted the significance of school lunches as an incentive for children and a means to alleviate hunger (Bezerra, 2009; Freitas *et al.*, 2013). However, few have moved beyond this obvious perspective to explore other interpretations of the importance of food at school and the diverse meanings it may reveal. The narratives of EDM children refer to elements that shape their lives in their community, including aspects of nature and the environment associated with working the land, which are characteristic of agrarian communities.

EDM presents itself as a border situation, where the construction of belonging or identity with the rural environment is marked by conflict and negotiation among the school's members. This tension is reflected in the curriculum, PPP, and the teaching staff, whose statements often suggest studying as a means to leave "the country life," thereby reinforcing the notions of exodus and migration while valuing urban life. In contrast, children use strategies to intertwine their experiences of home, the field, and school through the common foods that circulate among these spaces.

Nascimento and Amoras (2017) analyze the use of PBF resources in Belém, Pará, and find that, while adults strive to allocate resources according to PBF guidelines, this is not always achieved. Children often impose new demands, which leads to deviations in parental management practices due to the children's agency, thus impacting market and family dynamics. Similarly, Pires and Jardim (2014) and Pires (2009; 2013; 2016) have explored children's involvement with PBF resources, particularly concerning food. These studies highlight the significance of children's desires in family dynamics and emphasize the high value children place on food.

This relationship with food is evident in various aspects, from children's involvement in managing PBF resources in different locations, as highlighted in the aforementioned studies, to the consistent choice by EDM children to use food as the primary means of communication with researchers about their experiences at school.

In this sense, this article focuses on analyzing the relationship between food and belonging in the narratives of EDM children. It highlights how the general discourse of the staff and the curriculum's design do not reflect a sense of belonging to the rural environment. Conversely, the children's narratives emphasize the importance of a diet typical of rural life, or at least value elements that are associated with the countryside. This contrasts with the eating experiences of urban children, which are often characterized by industrialized products, as noted by Pires (2013) and Benjamin (2010). Thus, the children's sense of belonging to the countryside is reflected in the foods they consume and mention, which are predominantly from rural areas.

To conclude this reflection, we emphasize that rice is considered a central element in the gastronomy of Maranhão, particularly in Imperatriz, due to the significance of the rice cycle (Franklin, 2008). Rice is valued as a primary food, served in larger quantities and forming the foundation of the diet for the people of Maranhão, with *cuxá* rice being a notable local dish often highlighted by tourists. The statement made by a child, which titles this article, encapsulates the construction of a regional and rural identity within a community situated on Estrada do Arroz. In this culture, where rice is a staple dish and the connection between school and food reflects rural values, even the teacher is associated with rice in the children's creative and revealing representations.

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