



# Emerging possibilities in narratives of teachers of multigrade classes: teaching-learning in 'Escolas das Águas' in the Pantanal, Brazil

*Possibilidades emergentes em narrativas de professores de turmas multisseriadas: ensinar-aprender em Escolas das Águas no Pantanal*

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## Abstract

*Multigrade settings is a form of educational organization generally used in contexts of low population density. In Corumbá, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, there is a group of teaching units called Escolas das Águas, characterized by being in a region of difficult access and whose dynamics are influenced by the water cycle of the Pantanal plain. Given this scenario, this article aims to highlight, in the narratives of teachers of multigrade classes, the emergence of possibilities for teaching-learning in Escolas das Águas in the Pantanal of Mato Grosso do Sul. To this proposal, a qualitative research was carried out, with the participation of 21 teachers, who were interviewed in 2019. The results were organized into two analytical sections: the first one presents the organization and functioning of Escolas das Águas; the second focuses on the teachers' narratives about teaching-learning in multigrade classes of Escolas das Águas. It is concluded that teaching narratives may*

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*evoke counter-hegemonic teaching-learning experiences, which simultaneously bring announcements of creativity in pedagogical practices in complex contexts. Also highlight complaints about the often precarious material conditions for carrying out the educational process in these locations.*

**Keywords:** Multigrade class. Dissemination of educational experiences. Working conditions of the teaching profession.

## Resumo

As escolas/classes multisseriadas é uma forma de organização educativa geralmente utilizada em contextos de baixa densidade demográfica. Em Corumbá, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brasil, há um conjunto de unidades de ensino denominado de Escolas das Águas, caracterizadas por estarem em região de difícil acesso e cuja dinâmica é influenciada pelo ciclo das águas da planície do Pantanal. Em face a este cenário, o presente artigo objetiva evidenciar, em narrativas de professores de turmas multisseriadas, a emergência de possibilidades de ensinar-aprender em Escolas das Águas no Pantanal sul-mato-grossense. Para tanto, foi realizada uma pesquisa qualitativa, com a participação de 21 professores, que foram entrevistados no ano de 2019. Os resultados foram organizados em duas seções analíticas: a primeira apresenta a organização e o funcionamento das Escolas das Águas; a segunda focaliza as narrativas docentes sobre o ensinar-aprender em turmas multisseriadas das Escolas das Águas. Conclui-se que as narrativas docentes podem evocar experiências de ensinar-aprender contra-hegemônicas, que trazem, simultaneamente, anúncios de criatividade de práticas pedagógicas em contextos complexos e denúncias quanto às, muitas vezes, precárias condições materiais para a realização do processo educacional nessas localidades.

**Palavras-chave:** Classe multisseriada. Disseminação de experiências educativas. Condições do trabalho docente.

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*No Pantanal ninguém pode passar régua.  
Sobremuito quando chove.  
A régua é existidura de limites.  
E o Pantanal não tem limites.*  
“Mundo Renovado”, Manoel de Barros (2021, p. 29)<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

A study conducted by Angela W. Little<sup>2</sup> in 2004 for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) monitoring report on the Education for All (EFA) initiative — *Learning and Teaching in Multigrade Settings* (2005) — highlights the importance of monitoring multigrade schooling environments. In her work, Little (2004) states that, in most countries, schools are structured around single-grade classrooms and that teachers are typically trained specifically for this arrangement. Therefore, when faced with situations that deviate from this organizational structure, teachers struggle to perform effectively.

Considering that the quality of education depends on multiple factors (student grouping, teacher allocation, curriculum structure and quality, quantity and quality of teaching and learning materials, teacher training systems, and evaluation mechanisms), it is equally important to account for alternative school formats that differ from the most common ones. This is because, as Little (2004, p. 3) notes: “General issues of quality that arise in teacher preparation, curricula, materials and assessment are exacerbated in settings where the basic systemic premise of one teacher per class of single grade learners is not met”.

Little (2004) also points out that, in general, teachers in these contexts are expected to follow the standard curriculum and meet student assessment expectations as if they were teaching a single-grade class. This international study is relevant because it helps us understand that this form of school organization is not limited to countries with characteristics similar to Brazilian Basic Education, but rather it is a reality found worldwide. However, according to the author, there is no precise data on the number of schools with “multigrade”<sup>3</sup> characteristics. For instance, in 1988, 40% of schools in the Northern Territories of Australia had multigrade classes; in England, in 2000, 25.4% of all primary education classes were classified as “mixed year” (i.e., two or more grade levels taught by a single teacher); and in Northern Ireland, in 2002/2003, 21.6% of all classes (from 1st to 7th grade) were described as “composite” (two or more grades taught together) (Little, 2004).

The circumstances leading to the existence of multigrade classrooms across countries are quite similar and are usually related to areas with low population density and, therefore, an insufficient number of students to form single-grade classes, or to schools established in regions experiencing population growth and school expansion, where there is a shortage of teachers (Little, 2004; Parente, 2014). However, there are also multigrade classes that result from intentional pedagogical choices (Little, 2004; Parente, 2014; Pacheco & Pacheco, 2015), which may serve as a space for developing counter-hegemonic strategies in the face of teaching control policies (Moura & Santos, 2012).

When considering the pedagogical potential of work conducted in multigrade classrooms, the current Brazilian context draws attention, particularly the adoption of regulatory policies and “educational accountability”, stemming from neoliberal ideologies, which exert enormous pressure on teachers’ work (Rabello & Oliveira, 2024; Santos & Vidal, 2024), imposing a hegemonic model on the educational landscape (Santos & Silva, 2021) and guiding—or even “shaping”—pedagogical actions in the classroom. Within this

<sup>1</sup> Possible translation of the poem: In the Pantanal, no one can draw the line./Especially when it rains./A line is a limitstitch./And the Pantanal has no boundaries./‘A World Renewed’.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Barbosa & Meireles (2021, p. 18), multigrade classes are based on “the grouping of students who are at different learning levels and ages in the same classroom, under the responsibility of the work, usually of a teacher.”

context, pedagogical approaches that differ from the standard may carry the potential to resist such policies, establishing themselves as counter-hegemonic *praxis* (Gramsci, 1987).

In Brazil, multigrade classrooms are commonly found in schools located in remote areas, far from urban centers, and are typically created through administrative rather than pedagogical decisions. This is the case of schools in the Pantanal region of Mato Grosso do Sul state, in the municipality of Corumbá, known locally as *Escolas das Águas* [Water Schools]. These are characterized by their location in hard-to-access areas and by the fact that their activities are organized around the water cycles of the Pantanal floodplain (Zerlotti, 2014; Oliveira, 2018; Melo et al., 2020; Nozu & Kassar, 2022).

The structure of teaching and learning processes in multigrade classrooms reveals a variety of pedagogical possibilities. This multiplicity of viable paths emerges “as we delve into the reality of these environments through the accounts of teachers who experience their professional lives in these classrooms” (Barbosa & Meireles, 2021, p. 18, our translation).

Considering this context, the objective of this article is to highlight, through teacher narratives, the emergence of teaching and learning possibilities in the *Escolas das Águas* in the southern Pantanal region of Mato Grosso do Sul state.

## 2. Approaches to the empirical

This study followed a qualitative approach, aimed at understanding the meanings in teachers’ narratives about their everyday experiences (Punch, 2021). To this end, the research setting was defined as the *Escolas das Águas* (Water Schools) of the Pantanal, located in the municipality of Corumbá, state of Mato Grosso do Sul. It is important to note that the study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards and was preceded by explicit authorization from the Municipal Department of Education.<sup>4</sup>

Data collection took place in 2019 and 2020 and involved a diverse set of techniques, instruments, and participants. For the purposes of this article, we focused on the data from 2019, specifically those concerning teachers, the interview technique, and the theme of teaching in multigrade classrooms in the Pantanal region. That year, 35 teachers worked in the *Escolas das Águas*, of whom 21 agreed to participate in the research, expressing their consent by signing a Free and Informed Consent Form. It is worth emphasizing that the sample of 21 participating teachers includes representatives from all the schools operating at the time of data collection. Contact with the teachers was facilitated by the management team of the *Escolas das Águas*.

Data from the 21 participating teachers were collected through interviews conducted using a semi-structured interview guide with 15 questions. Of the 21 interviews, 11 were conducted on the premises of the *Escolas das Águas*, nine at the *Escolas das Águas* administrative office (located within the urban area of the municipality), and one via WhatsApp. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. To ensure anonymity, the 21 teachers are identified by sequential letters of the alphabet, from A to U.

The analysis is based on the premise that narratives can be understood as discourse—a construction that is both individual and collective—shaped by a dialectical dynamic of appropriation, reverberation, and confrontation with other discourses. It is, therefore, socially and materially grounded, in which the sign (in this case, the word, the discourse) “reflects and refracts reality in motion” (Bakhtin, 1988, p. 39, our translation).

Moreover, we draw on Freire’s conception of teaching and learning, in the sense that “there is no teaching without learning” (Freire, 2001, p. 259, our translation), as well as the understanding “that teaching is not the transmission of knowledge, but the creation of possibilities for building or developing it” (Freire, 2009, p. 22, our translation).

<sup>4</sup> Based on this authorization, the research project was submitted to the *Plataforma Brasil* system and obtained the Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Consideration (CAAE, acronym in Portuguese): 25693219.1.0000.5160.

Finally, we understand emergent teaching and learning possibilities as those modes of constructing the educational act that question fixed models of teaching and learning and point to the emergence of counter-hegemonic pedagogical alternatives. In other words, possibilities that show it is not possible to simply “draw the line” on teaching and learning processes, as the poet Manoel de Barros (2021) suggests in the epigraph that opens this article, in relation to the uncontrollable nature of the Pantanal.

The data were organized into two sections. The first presents the organization and functioning of the *Escolas das Águas* in the Pantanal. The second focuses on teachers’ narratives about teaching and learning in multigrade classrooms within the *Escolas das Águas*.

### 3. *Escolas das Águas*: organization and functioning

The Pantanal is considered the largest floodplain in the world (Zanata & Maciel, 2020). The territory of Corumbá lies entirely within this biome and is known as the “Gateway to the Pantanal” (Barros, 2021, p. 17, our translation). The municipality also has the largest geographic area in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, and within this region are the *Escolas das Águas*, with school units located up to 500 km away from *Porto Geral* – one of Brazil’s largest river ports (Melo, 2017; Nozu & Kassar, 2020; Melo et al., 2022).

The *Escolas das Águas* are organized into central hubs and satellite units<sup>5</sup> and are spread across three regions<sup>6</sup> (Lower, Middle, and Upper Pantanal), serving a diverse population of the Pantanal. The Lower Pantanal is home to around 233 families, the Middle Pantanal approximately 220 families, and the Upper Pantanal about 198 families. These are low-income families who receive benefits from the *Bolsa Família* program<sup>7</sup>, with limited access to healthcare, social assistance, and education (Zerlotti, 2014; Melo, 2017; Rios, 2020). Family members typically work as artisanal fishers, bait collectors (known locally as *isqueiros*), small-scale farmers, miners, and primarily as ranch hands (*peões de boiadeiros*) on cattle farms (Melo, 2017). The number of *Escolas das Águas* changes from year to year, depending on local demand and shifts in the Municipal Department of Education’s structure (Melo et al., 2022; Nozu & Kassar, 2020; Oliveira, 2018). In 2019, there were nine school units, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** – Organization of *Escolas das Águas* (2019)

Region	Educational unit	Classification	Number of students	Stages of Basic Education	Classes
Lower Pantanal (lower part of the Paraguay river)	Porto Esperança	Hub	21	Early Childhood Education Early and final grades of Elementary Education	Multigrade
	Sebastião Rolon	Hub	22	Early and final grades of Elementary Education	Multigrade
Middle Pantanal (Taquari region)	Nazaré	Satellite	41	Early and final grades of Elementary Education	Multigrade
	Santa Aurélia	Hub	11	Early and final grades of Elementary Education	Multigrade
	São João	Satellite	34	Early Childhood Education	Multigrade

<sup>5</sup> Although the educational units have independent physical structures, the extensions are administratively linked to those classified as hubs (Oliveira, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Division used by the municipal administration for actions related to social policies (Corumbá, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> The *Bolsa Família* Program is a conditional cash transfer initiative launched by the Brazilian Federal Government in 2003 to reduce poverty and social inequality. It provides monthly financial assistance to low-income families, contingent upon meeting certain requirements, such as ensuring children’s school attendance and up-to-date vaccination records.

Region	Educational unit	Classification	Number of students	Stages of Basic Education	Classes
Upper Pantanal (upper part of the Paraguay river)	São Lourenço	Hub	20	Early and final grades of Elementary Education	Multigrade
	Santa Mônica	Satellite	50	Early grades of Elementary Education	Single-grade and Multigrade
	Paraguai Mirim	Hub	46	Early Childhood Education Early and final grades of Elementary Education	Multigrade
	Jatobazinho	Satellite	48	Early Childhood Education Early grades of Elementary Education	Single-grade and Multigrade

Source : Elaborated by the authors (2025).

According to Table 1, among the nine school units: (a) one was located in the Lower Pantanal, four in the Middle Pantanal, and four in the Upper Pantanal; (b) five were classified as central hubs and four as satellite extensions; (c) enrollment ranged from 11 to 50 students per school, totaling 293 registered students; (d) all offered early grades of Elementary Education, four offered early childhood education (pre-school), and seven offered upper Elementary Education; and (e) seven were organized with multigrade classrooms and two with both single-grade and multigrade classrooms.

In general, in 2019, multigrade organization in the *Escolas das Águas* involved grouping students by stage of Basic Education. For example, classes might include students from Early Childhood Education (Pre-school I and II), from the early grades (1st to 5th grade), or from the final grades of Elementary Education (6th to 9th grade). Two schools were exceptions to this structure: the *Santa Mônica* unit had one class with 1st and 2nd graders, another with 3rd and 4th graders, and one single-grade class with 5th graders; the *Jatobazinho* unit had a mixed-level class (Pre-school II and 1st grade) and single-grade classes from 2nd to 5th grade. Despite having predominantly single-grade classes, *Jatobazinho*, which operated on a full-time schedule, developed the diversified part of the curriculum through multigrade grouping.

The physical and environmental diversity of the Pantanal affects all aspects of pedagogical organization in the *Escolas das Águas*, from the academic calendar to school transportation. In 2019, for example, six different school calendars were in use among the nine school units. Regarding operation, two schools (*Santa Aurélia* and *São João*) followed a regular schedule, while the remaining seven operated on a full-time basis (Nozu et al., 2020).

Although referred to as *Escolas das Águas* [Water Schools], not all school units are located along the rivers (Melo, 2017), especially those in the Middle Pantanal, which have been affected by the silting of the Taquari River (Nozu et al., 2020). In general, the physical infrastructure of the school units was simple, although the buildings varied: some made of masonry, others of wood, built on stilts or directly on dry ground (Nozu & Kassar, 2020).

Due to the long distances between students' homes and schools, and the logistical challenges of navigating the Pantanal, five schools offered on-site student housing<sup>8</sup> in 2019: *Nazaré*, *Paraguai Mirim*, *Jatobazinho*, *São Lourenço*, and *Santa Mônica*. In the first three schools, students stayed in dormitories during the week and returned home on weekends; in the latter two, students stayed at the school for the full two-month term (Nozu et al., 2020).

<sup>8</sup> According to Melo et al. (2022), some routes between students' homes and the schools take up to seven hours.



For students who lived closer to the school—a commute of about one hour each way—public transportation was provided via school boats (*barco escola*) and tractors with trailers (*trator com carretinha*) (Nozu & Kassar, 2020). The *school boat* was more common in units located along the Paraguay River and its tributaries, while the *tractor with trailer* was used in schools located in sandy or dry land areas. According to Nozu & Kassar (2023, p. 213, our translation), “the *school boat* and the *tractor with trailer* embody, to some extent, the particularities of the *Escolas das Águas*, as well as the challenges of delivering education across roadless and river-based regions of the Pantanal in Corumbá.”

As previously mentioned, in 2019, 35 teachers worked in the *Escolas das Águas*. Each school had between three and four teachers, except for *Paraguai Mirim* and *Jatobazinho*, which had five and six teachers, respectively (Nozu et al., 2020). Approximately 42 professionals also worked in the *Escolas das Águas* as cleaning, kitchen, transportation (boat pilots, tractor drivers), and dormitory staff. The *Jatobazinho* unit, in particular, also had five resident educators and five extracurricular monitors.

Administratively, the management team of the *Escolas das Águas* consisted of one principal, three pedagogical coordinators (each responsible for overseeing three schools), one secretary, and two administrative assistants. This management team carried out its work both at the headquarters located in the urban area of Corumbá and at the school units, through visits and itinerant pedagogical supervision (Nozu & Kassar, 2022). Although the *Escolas das Águas* had their own administrative-pedagogical staff, they were linked to the Rural Education Division (Núcleo de Educação do Campo) of the Municipal Department of Education (Nozu et al., 2020).

It is worth noting that two of the nine school units operated under public-private partnerships, both located in the Upper Pantanal: *Santa Mônica*, managed in partnership between the Municipal Government and the *Instituto Rural Escola das Águas*; and *Jatobazinho*, managed in partnership with the *Instituto Acaia* (Melo, 2017; Oliveira, 2018). The physical infrastructure and human resources of *Santa Mônica* and *Jatobazinho* differed in both quality and quantity from the other school units (Melo, 2017; Rios, 2020).

#### 4. Teachers’ narratives on teaching and learning in multigrade classes at the *Escolas das Águas*: emergence of possibilities

The impossibility of “drawing the line” in the Pantanal, as poet Manoel de Barros reminds us, may well be a feature of educational processes everywhere; however, it seems to manifest itself most markedly in the *Escolas das Águas*. Thus, the research conducted in these schools involves not only the production of relevant knowledge about the context, structure, and organization of the school units, but also strongly engages with reflections on the lives of those involved in the educational process. In this section, we aim to share the narratives of 21 teachers who worked in the *Escolas das Águas* in the Pantanal in the year 2019. The school unit where each teacher was based is not identified in order to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Table 2 identifies each teacher (by letter), along with their gender, initial teacher education, years of experience in the *Escolas das Águas*, and type of employment contract

Table 2 – Teachers of Multigrade Classes at *Escolas das Águas*: training and experience (2019)

Teacher	Gender	Initial teacher education	Experience at <i>Escolas das Águas</i>	Employment type
A	Male	Biological Sciences	5 years	Temporary
B	Female	Biological Sciences	3 years	Temporary
C	Female	Pedagogy	6 years	Permanent
D	Male	Physical Education	2 years	Temporary
E	Female	Pedagogy	10 years	Temporary

Teacher	Gender	Initial teacher education	Experience at <i>Escolas das Águas</i>	Employment type
F	Female	Pedagogy	12 years	Temporary
G	Female	Biological Sciences	6 years	Temporary
H	Male	History	7 years	Temporary
I	Male	Pedagogy	4 years	Temporary
J	Female	Pedagogy	32 years	Temporary
K	Male	Pedagogy	4 years	Temporary
L	Female	Pedagogy	1 year	Temporary
M	Female	Pedagogy	1 year	Temporary
N	Female	Pedagogy	33 years	Temporary
O	Female	Biological Sciences	2 years	Temporary
P	Female	Pedagogy	12 years	Temporary
Q	Female	Biological Sciences	1 year	Temporary
R	Female	Pedagogy	1 year	Temporary
S	Female	Pedagogy	2.5 years	Temporary
T	Female	Pedagogy	5 years	Temporary
U	Male	Pedagogy	5 years	Temporary

Source : Elaborated by the authors (2025).

A first glance at Table 2 already reveals that all teachers hold university degrees, and nearly all have temporary contracts. Among the 21 teachers: (a) 14 hold degrees in Pedagogy, five in Biological Sciences, one in Physical Education, and one in History; (b) their teaching experience in the *Escolas das Águas* ranges from one to 33 years; and (c) only one teacher holds a permanent position. The prevalence of temporary contracts can hinder long-term planning and the development of sustained projects. This situation also seems to create uncertainty that affects pedagogical work in these schools, as evidenced in the account of Teacher A (our translation):

This year was particularly difficult because, due to bureaucracy, we weren't sure whether we would return to the school, since almost all of us are on temporary contracts; the majority are contracted teachers. As far as I know, there are only two permanent teachers working in the *Escolas das Águas*... the rest of the staff are all on temporary contracts. So, because of this bureaucracy, this was one of those years when we didn't know who would be coming, who would be hired.

Regarding the beginning of their work in these schools, after being approved and ranked in the Municipal Department of Education's temporary selection process and before officially taking up the position, these teachers receive pedagogical training from the management team, lasting approximately eight hours, held at the administrative headquarters of the *Escolas das Águas* in the urban area of Corumbá and includes: (a) the particular characteristics of each school unit; (b) working in multigrade classrooms; and (c) the expectation that teachers reside on school premises during the term (Melo, 2017; Melo et al., 2022; Nozu & Kassir, 2020). It is noted that, upon the formalization of their employment contract, teachers receive a 20% increase on their base salary due to the "hard-to-reach area" compensation clause (Melo et al., 2022).

Teaching in the *Escolas das Águas* is marked by pedagogical, structural, material, staffing, and logistical challenges. As noted in the previous section, each school has between three and six teachers responsible for teaching the curricular areas. In 2019, the Early Childhood Education curriculum was structured around seven learning areas: "Self, Others, and Us; Listening, Speaking, Thinking, and



Imagining; Spaces, Time, Quantities, Relations, and Transformations; Body, Gestures, and Movements; Traces, Sounds, Colors, and Shapes; Modern Foreign Language; and Elective Activities” (Corumbá, 2017, p. 8, our translation). The Elementary Education curriculum, in turn, was composed of core components—Portuguese Language, Mathematics, History, Geography, Science, Art, Physical Education, and Modern Foreign Language—as well as a diversified component—Media and Technology, Citizenship Education, Artistic and Cultural Activities, Sports Initiation, and Guidance for Study, Research, and Orality (Corumbá, 2017; Melo, 2017; Melo et al., 2022).

Given the ratio of curricular subjects to the number of teachers per school, it was often necessary for teachers to teach subjects outside their area of initial teacher education. As reported by Teacher B, who holds a degree in Biological Sciences, the school management team tried to align subjects with the teachers’ areas of expertise as much as possible, but teachers were frequently required to broaden their knowledge and professional scope:

The management team evaluates. [...]. However, my colleague is also from Biological Sciences, and he ended up with Math and Science... It’s not that I don’t connect with my area—I do! But I also have it in several other areas: Geography, History... So, I can work really well, if I may say so myself [laughs]... Anyway, it’s because I’ve worked on many projects [...] multidisciplinary, and those projects always bring that richness [...] of knowledge (Teacher B, our translation).

The diversity of roles was also reported in other experiences, such as that of Teacher O (our translation), who holds a degree in Biological Sciences: “I learned a lot, I keep learning... I taught outside my field—Portuguese...I have to study to be able to at least teach them [students] the basics”. Teacher A (our translation), also a graduate in Biological Sciences, reported:

I am, at the same time, a beloved teacher because I teach Physical Education, which is one of the classes they like the most, and I’m not the hated teacher, but I am the most feared teacher because I teach Mathematics, which is the subject they struggle with the most.

For teaching under these conditions, the academic knowledge received by teachers during their university education often proves insufficient, especially since these professionals are not trained to work in multigrade classrooms (Little, 2004). Teacher C (our translation) explains her classroom organization: “We have two boards. That one’s for first grade. For second grade, I usually use handouts... This one’s for fourth and fifth grades”. Meanwhile, Teacher T’s (our translation) account tells us:

It’s multigrade all this mixture! Sometimes, the child gets a little lost too, right? Because you’re explaining to one student from a different grade, even though it’s the same subject, they end up listening to what you’re saying to the other student, you know? But, gradually, we manage to get the activities done.

These narratives reveal that:

The diversity of pedagogical strategies created and recreated within multigrade schools demonstrates one of the strengths that characterize educational experiences developed in contexts with this pedagogical configuration. This richness of teaching [and learning] methods needs to be brought out of obscurity to be recognized as part of the teaching [and learning] practices—a pedagogical heritage that must be acknowledged and valued (Barbosa & Meireles, 2021, p. 22, our translation).

However, the multigrade school is still often identified as a pedagogical organization of lower quality compared to the single-grade organization. Thus, it is necessary to problematize the hegemonic model of grading, perpetuated as the only and ideal form of pedagogical organization. In this regard, Teacher I’s (our translation) account is defiant:

[...] even though we are multigrade, the students don't have greater difficulties than those from there [urban schools], [...] because when they go to the city, they don't fall behind. I know many who are now... well employed, who studied in rural areas... So, I think that's it, [...], so there's no comparison. I believe we are on equal footing. It may be remote, but education is always there!

The experience in multigrade classrooms leaves different perceptions and feelings that go beyond pedagogical practice, as Teacher Q (our translation) reported:

There, at the *Escola das Águas*, you learn not only how to teach multigrade classes, but also about your own self... You make many sacrifices to be there... I don't consider myself better than any other teacher, I know I still have a lot to learn in terms of experience, but I think every teacher should spend time at the *Escola das Águas*, even if just for a month—as a formative experience: “I'm going to spend time at this school,” “I'm going to forget a bit about my own world,” which I think is “my world,” and live a bit of that reality.

In light of these challenges, the Municipal Department of Education organizes some continuing education activities during the intervals between bimester periods at the administrative headquarters of the *Escolas das Águas* in the urban area (Nozu & Kassar, 2020, 2022; Rios, 2020). Hilbig (2021) documented the implementation of a continuing education course focused on the inclusion of students from Special Education in the *Escolas das Águas*, developed based on demands indicated by the teachers of these school units. A significant part of the teachers' demands for continuing education focused on issues of diversity and inclusion in multigrade settings. However, the training offered does not consistently meet teachers' needs. Sambrana (2024) conducted a study on continuing education for teachers in rural and *Escolas das Águas* municipal schools in Corumbá, examining the perceptions of both teachers and the Municipal Department of Education professionals about the quality of the training activities, and found that although these activities are considered relevant by teachers, they still do not meet their expectations, as they fail to address the specificities present in their contexts.

Thus, the approach to the natural and cultural context of the Pantanal—with its fauna, flora, environmental degradation (especially due to wildfires), cultural knowledge and practices—and its relationships with the *Escolas das Águas* has been a recurring topic for management and pedagogical work within the school units (Nozu & Kassar, 2023; Zerlotti, 2014). This issue requires ongoing attention, especially due to the high turnover of contracted teachers in the school units (Melo, 2017; Nozu et al., 2020), a problem also present in other countries (Ling et al., 2020), and the fact that the vast majority of teachers do not come from the communities where the schools are located. Regarding this last point, in 2019, only Teachers C, I, J, and N lived in communities nearby or in the Pantanal region.

As most teachers live in the urban area of Corumbá (Nozu et al., 2020), commuting to the school units involves many hours, and in some cases days, depending on weather conditions in the Pantanal plain and the available means of transportation. These conditions become part of the teachers' lives: “there's the personal issue of having to leave your family behind—it's difficult” (Teacher B, our translation). Or, as Teacher O (our translation) narrated:

I traveled by freighter<sup>9</sup>, which took one day... Actually, it could take up to two days to get there! When I arrived, they said: “- Here is the school.” I said, “- My God! I don't want to stay! I want to leave, I'm not going to stay, I'm not going to stay, I'm not going to stay for a month!” But as time went by, I got used to it.

The distance creates a sense of isolation, as Teacher S (our translation) reported:

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<sup>9</sup> The teacher refers to motorboats used for freight or transport.

The issue of isolation, right? There, it's more than just one [...], and it's only the first bimester! [laughs] There's still the rest of the year, because we are isolated at the school... It's a space where we feel very limited.

These conditions, in which the commitment to teaching at the *Escolas das Águas* involves living in dormitories within the school units spread across the Pantanal, signal both work opportunities and personal and professional challenges, as evidenced by the narrative of Teacher G (our translation) — “I started with the intention of staying only one month... I had just graduated... I said, ‘No! This will be my first job! I have to go and see how it will be, right?’” — and Teacher A (our translation):

At first, speaking for myself, it was out of necessity; it was where I found an open door and there I was able to receive support from the principal and the coordination at the time... I was offered the classroom, being presented with all the challenges, from the lodging to what I would find in the classroom. And I accepted the challenge! I went to an area that is difficult to work in, both physically and emotionally, where you are at, right? Two months there, away from family, away from the city... Things we're used to in daily life—it's a complete challenge. It is indeed a renunciation of personal life, of social life... we give up social life to live a rural life.

Some teachers, through their contact with a *Escola das Águas*, describe not only the challenges but also experiences of care and commitment to the community.

In 2013, I got a position, and then I took on the challenge of working at an *Escola das Águas*. When I arrived, it was a shock: “My goodness! Is this really a school?” But, little by little, the children win you over so deeply that you just can't leave anymore... the warmth of the families, the parents, the respect they have for the teacher... So, that is very important, right? (Teacher H, our translation).

Mota's (2024) study, by recording teaching experiences in rural schools, showed that the relationships between teachers, students, and families present themselves as “a possibility for the enactment of a teaching practice enriched by the bonds built in rural communities where the teacher ends up developing other work activities beyond teaching” (Mota, 2024, p. 15, our translation). The bond formed between teachers and the local community is also documented in other countries, such as in the study by Barley & Beesley (2007), which the authors identify as one of the possible success factors for schools in non-urban regions within U.S. states. This strong relationship was also emphasized by other teachers, such as Teacher N (our translation) — “I don't do anything at school without informing the parents... If I don't communicate... anything I'm doing, because they are always with me, they've supported me since I first arrived!” — or Teacher A (our translation):

When we arrive at the school, we hear from the student, “No! If necessary, we would organize a petition for you to come.” So, we realize our work really matters, it's not in vain... The respect that the parents have for us... the consideration...

Living in the school units, in the context of the Pantanal, as both a place of work and residence, even if temporarily, shapes emotions, social and pedagogical practices, perceptions, and the identity formation of the *Escolas das Águas* teachers, since, in most cases, the teachers are immersed in a material reality unlike anything they had experienced before. These material conditions emerge in their statements and intertwine with their perceptions and expectations:

We live in a school, with seven staff members and seven more staying in the dormitories... Each with their own personality... and you have to learn to live with all of it, but at the same time, you see, we are close to the community, we are near... So, there's that thing, but it all becomes like family... And you always try to give your best (Teacher O, our translation).

Teacher F refers to her uncertainties regarding the school's location during the periods she is in the city: "Now that the river's dried up... How are we going to... How will we return? How will we get back by road? How will we find the school? How will we find our students?" (Teacher F, our translation).

In this context, teachers often see themselves in different "roles" that go beyond the position of teachers. This aspect was more clearly perceived in some narratives: "These students stay with us more than with their families, right? We become both father and mother figures" (Teacher B, our translation); or "every teacher who comes here ends up becoming mother and father, you know? Because you stay here the whole day with these children... You are mother, you are father to these children, you know..." (Teacher F, our translation). This "confluence" of roles can lead to a distancing from the educational/school function of teaching: "being a teacher at the *Escolas das Águas* means being a parent, a doctor—and only then, a teacher" (Teacher C, our translation).

The perception of being distant from the teacher's place of origin seems intertwined with how he/she perceives the material conditions of the school and its surroundings: "You complain... There you see and miss everything, but at the same time you say: 'Wow, I used to complain about that back there!' Here it doesn't even exist, so you learn from it, you know?" (Teacher O, our translation). Mota (2024, p. 3, our translation) explains that the teacher's perception expresses "the way each teacher relates to their life reality and seeks, through experience production, diverse ways of carrying out teaching."

Addressing the work in the *Escolas das Águas* leads us to understand the context of *Educação do Campo* [Rural Education], as analyzed by Janata & Anhaia (2015). According to the authors, a training based on values positioned counter-hegemonically in relation to the neoliberal perspective would be necessary. As Janata & Anhaia (2015, p. 693, our translation) state:

The fundamental principles for the education of teachers working in multigrade rural schools/classes, in our view, need to be articulated with Rural Education, understanding it as the accumulation of the struggle of rural workers who recognize the importance and necessity of expanding it beyond land access, understanding that more radical changes in the structure of society are necessary. Education is gradually incorporated as fundamental in this process. The Brazilian countryside is placed on the national agenda in its different aspects, with an emphasis on education and the discussion of a social project, denouncing the precariousness of rural schools and the need for training teachers who work in them.

However, even without adequate training, teachers seem to become captivated by unexpected challenges, as Teacher B (our translation) tells us:

There's something incredible about the freedom you feel in the Pantanal! I get emotional just talking about it, sorry [laughs]. This freedom, you know, of feeling like we're trying to make a difference, is really cool. It's not something easy to put into words... it's more about the feeling...

The enchantment seems to be deeply connected not only to the Pantanal itself, but also to the very experience of being a teacher in this region. To understand this process, we turn to the relevance of Freirean thought today, as well reminded by Lima et al. (2021), and the voices of the teachers themselves:

It's a learning process for ourselves! I like it, and I liked it from the start too, you know... I cried because I needed to and I had to go, right? The first time, I cried, it felt like I couldn't handle it anymore, but then I started liking it. The kids are very affectionate, I loved it, you know, and I don't want to leave! (Teacher P, our translation).

[...] knowing, trying to discover, learning to live alongside the community, the students—letting them into your life, and becoming part of theirs, you know? Having that trust in each other, right? Always being like this, sharing with one another... (Teacher N, our translation).

Every day is a learning experience... Every day, different things... The kids bring different things, you learn things, you teach things (Teacher D, our translation).

Every day we learn a little from each one of them, right? I think that's the most important thing... (Teacher H, our translation).

For me, it's an exchange of experiences because it's more than "the teacher knows everything"... But we don't know everything, because their experience... what they pass to us from their daily life... how we pass knowledge to them, and they already... It's all grounded in lived experience! (Teacher E, our translation).

Amid the material reality of multigrade classrooms in the *Escolas das Águas*, the teaching and learning relationship, inherent in educational interactions (Freire, 2001), can be found in various narratives. The initial impact of encountering the different, captured in the words of Teacher O (our translation) – "I arrived and they said, 'Here is the school'; I said, 'My God! I don't want to stay!'" – gradually transforms into the wonder expressed by Teacher B (our translation): "The freedom of being in the Pantanal is incredible!" However, the freedom of the Pantanal's nature may also be present in the freedom experienced within a pedagogical relationship, where standard models cannot be followed because of the unique conditions: "It's cool, this freedom, this feeling that we are trying to make a difference" (Teacher B, our translation).

In *Carta aos Professores* [Letter to Teachers], published in 2001, Paulo Freire begins precisely by emphasizing the teach-learn relationship:

What I mean is that teaching and learning occur in such a way that the one who teaches also learns—on the one hand, by recognizing previously acquired knowledge, and on the other, by observing how the curiosity of the student-learner operates in grasping what is being taught, without which learning cannot take place, the teacher is helped to reveal doubts, clarify insights, and correct mistake (Freire, 2001, p. 259, our translation).

Perhaps the *Escolas das Águas*, with their multigrade classrooms, are among the places where experience immediately leads us to the "reading of the world, reading of the word" (Freire, 2001). There, the teachers reveal themselves full of the characteristics Freire calls for in the teaching and learning relationship: humility, openness, a teacher "permanently willing to rethink what has been thought, to reflect on their own positions" (Freire, 2001, p. 259, our translation). This relationship is present in excerpts from the teachers' narratives presented earlier: "the children bring different things, you learn things, you teach things" (Teacher D, our translation); "it is a learning experience for ourselves" (Teacher P, our translation); or "every day we learn a little from each one of them" (Teacher H, our translation).

Enchantment and engagement are fundamental aspects of the pedagogical relationship, but these cannot do without competence for the pedagogical act:

The fact, however, that teaching teaches the teacher to teach a certain content should by no means imply that the teacher attempts to teach without the necessary competence to do so. It does not authorize them to teach what they do not know. The ethical, political, and professional responsibility of the teacher places on them the duty to prepare, improve, and train before even beginning their teaching activity (Freire, 2001, p. 259, our translation).

From this perspective, it is necessary to challenge the silence surrounding teacher preparation for work in multigrade classrooms. On one hand, teaching and learning in these settings reveal "the authenticity of practices invented and reinvented in everyday life, as ways to overcome methodologies imposed by the graded model" (Barbosa & Meireles, 2021, p. 21, our translation); on the other, we cannot ignore or accept the conditions that contribute to the deterioration of teachers' working conditions.



## 5. Final considerations

Much of the literature documents the challenges of pedagogical practice in multigrade classrooms, especially in schools located far from urban centers. However, the organization and practice within multigrade settings can be a pedagogical choice to build strategic counter-hegemonic educational alternatives against the standardization and control policies imposed on Basic Education teachers (Moura & Santos, 2012). Moreover, by problematizing the hegemony of the graded model, experiences developed in multigrade classrooms may represent a pedagogical heritage of teacher creativity, which builds “a repertoire of practices that foster their own ways of teaching and learning” (Barbosa & Meireles, 2021, p. 23, our translation).

Based on these principles, this article highlighted the teaching and learning possibilities in multigrade classrooms of the *Escolas das Águas* in the southern Pantanal of Mato Grosso do Sul state, through teachers’ narratives. These reports — both individual and collective — form a complex fabric, rooted in material realities, expressing aspirations in the face of professional challenges, personal sacrifices, commitments to the community, diverse ways of teaching and learning, and multiple roles that extend beyond teaching.

The experiences narrated by teachers in multigrade classrooms suggest that pedagogical commitment requires *study*, and studying “means unveiling, gaining a deeper understanding of the object, to perceive its relationships with other objects. It implies that the scholar, as the subject of the study, takes risks, ventures forth—without which there is neither creation nor re-creation” (Freire, 2001, p. 265, our translation).

The work of teachers in multigrade classrooms in the *Escolas das Águas* can serve as a powerful pedagogical experience for confronting accountability policies, curricular inflexibility, competition, and pressure from large-scale assessments. These narratives suggest that it is not possible to simply “draw a line” in the Pantanal and, perhaps, the *Escolas das Águas* remind us that it is not possible to “draw a line” in the schooling process. However, it is important to emphasize that the pedagogical possibilities emerging from teachers’ narratives in the *Escolas das Águas* should not be reduced to mere enchantment with the Pantanal, but must also draw attention to the inadequate infrastructure, the lack of specific teacher training, and the precarious working conditions that persist in these schools.

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