

# Popular education, youth and peasant agroecology in Brazil

M.B. Goris<sup>a,b,c,\*</sup>, I. Silva Lopes<sup>a</sup>, G. Verschoor<sup>b</sup>, J. Behagel<sup>c</sup>, M.I.V. Botelho<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Rural Economy, Federal University of Viçosa, Brazil

<sup>b</sup> Sociology and Anthropology of Development Group, Wageningen University, the Netherlands

<sup>c</sup> Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group, Wageningen University, the Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

Most young people engaged in agroecology in Zona da Mata Mineira, Brazil, participate in popular education. Popular education is a Latin-American concept that entails transformative learning, among others. Despite the large body of literature on popular education, there is little knowledge about how it supports reflection, enhances situated abilities, and affects relationships between young farmers and nature. This article looks at popular education practices in Zona da Mata in three different places: a family farming high school, a youth organization, and a workers' union school. Each place gives special attention to agroecology. Based on participatory observations, video recordings, films made by youth, interviews and analysis of educational materials this article visualizes how young people become engaged in peasant agroecology through the use of affective experiences, relationship-building, and reflection in popular education. Our findings show that the pedagogic method of alternation used at the family farming high school fosters on-farm learning experiences between young farmers and their parents. At the workers' union school and at the youth organization intentional leisure activities promoted joy, spirituality, activism and peasant culture, with joy becoming an explicit organizing force. We conclude that, in our cases, popular education positively supports, often in unexpected ways, relations young agroecological farmers have with their parents, nature, and youth from conventional farms.

## 1. Introduction

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) state that agroecology is a pathway to address various sustainable development goals (SDGs), to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and to preserve biodiversity (FAO 2018; Diaz et al., 2019). Agroecology is also an approach toward food sovereignty. It provides a set of principles to enhance relationships among people, farming and nature to ensure the autonomy of farmers and to transform food systems (Anderson et al., 2019). Agroecology is seen by some as simultaneously being a science, an agricultural practice, and a social movement (Wezel et al., 2009).

Various authors state that horizontal pedagogical approaches and transformative learning practices in social movement organizations are key drivers for scaling-out agroecology to increase its uptake among farmers (Schwendler and Thompson 2017; Cacho et al., 2018; Anderson et al., 2019). Transformative learning practices that aim to scale out agroecology in Latin-American are part of what is called “popular education”. Popular education, both in schools and in social movement

practices, aims to form subjects that can transform their realities so that these become more socially and environmentally just (Freire 1968; Brandão 2006; Caldart 2012; Brazil 2014).

The practices through which popular education specifically enhances relationships among people and between people and nature are important for agroecology. In this article, we argue that such “scaling out” of agroecology is very much about relationality. For the aim of food sovereignty to be combined with environmental objectives more knowledge is needed about how practical relationships among people and between people and nature can become socially and environmentally just through popular education. The article explores how popular education engages young people in peasant agroecology and how practical experiences, including affects, and moments of reflection support the altering of relationships between people and nature. The ability to affect and be affected can alter the capacity to act (Deleuze and Guattari 2005). Reflection is about human beings questioning reality and becoming aware that realities shape them and are shaped by them, and thus can be changed by them. Freire stated that authentic reflection concerns people's relationships with the world (Freire 2016).

Popular education is often initiated by rural social movements, and

\* Corresponding author. Department of Rural Economy, Federal University of Viçosa, Brazil.

E-mail address: [margriet.goris@wur.nl](mailto:margriet.goris@wur.nl) (M.B. Goris).

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varies from primary schools to adult courses and university degrees (McCune et al., 2017). Popular education involves the reproduction of a collective historical subject that has the situated abilities to face social and ecological injustice. Moreover, meaningful relationships are known to emerge among students in popular education (McCune et al., 2017). In practice, this means that popular education can ensure the long-term survival of peasant organizations and strengthen collective agency. Social movements and governmental bodies may also share responsibility for popular education on peasant knowledge and values with peasant families and communities. The latter has been the case in Brazil, as we further discuss below.

The focus of this article is on practices of popular education taking place with young people in Zona da Mata Mineira, Brazil. It first discusses the history of popular education in Brazil, and places the concept of popular education in direct dialogue with ideas on transformative learning, critical place-based learning, and affect. The study uses a multi-modal (Rose 2011) and multi-sited (Leonard 2009) methodology. The findings highlight how popular education alters relationships in society through affect, joy and reflection. In turn, this supports social movements that champion the cause of agroecology as well as other ideals.

## 2. The trajectory of popular education in Brazil, its features, and the role of affect

In Brazil, in the past, the curriculum of formal education was mostly directed toward the future career of a small urban elite. The value of the countryside – including its inhabitants – was, and often still is treated as inferior to that of the city. Prejudices about farmers were reproduced in school curricula and within schools in rural areas. In addition, formal education led to de-skilling as farmers' skills and other vocational skills were not part of the curriculum (McCune et al., 2017, p.194). The effect of this policy can be seen in the inequality of access to education between rural and urban populations. While 16.7 % of the rural population never attended any school, the number is 8.5 % for the urban population (IBGE, 2013; cited in Braga 2015). This situation was already heavily criticized by Paulo Freire, an educator and philosopher, in his influential book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970). Freire rejected any form of instrumental literacy process (Freire 1970), and dedicated himself to emancipatory education by engaging students of all classes of society in a dialogue about the reality they lived and shaped, and which formed the basis of popular education. During dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985) Freire had to live in exile, and his work on the ground was put on hold. Underground however the call for popular education continued.

The call for popular education is about recognizing and valuing the different local cultures, knowledges, livelihoods, social struggles and spiritual beliefs of all those who partake in diverse learning practices. Popular education is committed to 1) dialogue; 2) affect; 3) the protagonism of popular classes; 4) the systematization, production and articulation of different knowledges and practices; 5) participatory research; 6) raising critical consciousness. In popular education, this is always 7) in relation to the reality of the people involved and committed to popular classes (Freire 1968; Brandão 2006; Brazil 2014).

It was within the struggles of *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra* (the Landless Workers Movement - MST) and other social movements that learning practices for rural youth with a focus on *Educação do campo* were constructed following the principles of popular education (Brandão 2006). They stated that they not only have the right to rural education, *Educação "no" campo*, (education on the countryside) but also to education that aligns with the reality of the countryside, *Educação "do" campo*, (education of the countryside) (Santos 2017, p.212, Caldart p.261, Ribeiro 2012). Rural education ensured the establishment of schools in rural areas, however with the same curriculum and didactical methods directed at urban areas and in which the rural population was conceived as an example of backwardness (Souza, 2008).

Within social movement organizations, part of popular education efforts became dedicated to the formation of young people. Young people began to identify themselves with the category of youth, and youth associations emerged in rural social movements and unions. The youth organizations and union schools addressed specific issues of young people while at the same time acknowledging the diversity of youth (de Castro 2016). The work of the *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* (Grassroots Ecclesial Communities - CEBs) of the Catholic Church took place in parallel to that of the MST, and led to the First Family Farming schools for young people, *Escolas Famílias Agrícolas* (EFA's) and Rural Family Houses or *Casas Familiares Rurais* (CFR's) from the 1980s onwards (Ribeiro 2008). The first Family Farming Schools and Rural Family Houses, both considered *Educação do Campo*, thus already started before the end of the dictatorship in Brazil and before public policies on *Educação do Campo* were in place.

With the approval of the constitution in 1988 and the process for re-democratization of Brazil, the space to discuss and institutionalize *Educação do Campo* was expanded. The national law (LDBEN, Lei 9.394/96) for example states that curriculum and methodology of secondary schools should be of interest to rural youth, and aligned with the agricultural calendar, seasonal conditions and work at the countryside (Brazil, 1996). Other public policies to support *Educação do Campo* followed: *Programa Nacional de Educação na Reforma Agrária* (Pronera), a public program to support education at settlements of agrarian reform, and *Programa de Apoio à Formação Superior em Licenciatura em Educação do Campo* (Procampo), a public program to support vocational training for teachers at *Educação do Campo*. Both programs were established and carried out in cooperation with and under the political pressure of social movement organizations (Santos 2017). Specifically, MST ensures that regional and national meetings across movements take place to share experiences with formation processes and to collectively demand policies that support these learning practices.

### 2.1. Features of popular education

In popular education, following the method of place-based learning, a student first acquire knowledge of those things most close to him/her and then of things farther and farther away (Sobel 2004). The work of Freire on critical pedagogy already makes references to place by referring to students as beings 'in a situation', meaning the temporal/spatial conditions that form them and that are formed by them (Freire 1968). Sobel explains that place-based learning starts with the food you eat and the place you live and belong to. This engages students simultaneously in a process of feeling of belonging through affective relationships and of reflection. Place-based learning is about learning in the community through hands-on, real-word experiences, and also about preparing students to live in harmony with nature and with each other. To do this, students must know the specific ecology, politics and other characteristics of that place (Woodhouse and Knapp 2000). Schoolbooks for common education do not meet this demand (Sobel 2004).

Pedagogy of alternation is a methodology used in popular education where students learn for a certain period at school, *Tempo Escola*, and another period in the community, *Tempo Comunidade*. This pedagogy has its origins in France in 1935, where parents and young farmers searched for a school system that allows them to learn from their families and in their community, and at schools that recognize and value their lives and work. The pedagogy of alternation enables young people to become familiar with traditional and scientific knowledge (Santos 2017), builds on the work experience of young people, and prevents that young people's ties with family and territory become less strong (Ribeiro 2008).

Popular education also includes elements of critical pedagogy. The latter draws attention to dynamics of race, power, place, and multiculturalism: "*Critical pedagogy offers an agenda of cultural decolonization, place-based education leads the way toward ecological reinhabitation*" (Gruenewald 2003, p. 310). Shumba (2012) and Barbosa (2017) further

discuss the heritage of colonialism in education and the need to contextualize education. They propose diversity and a non-European, local lens to look at the world. For [Hooks \(1994\)](#), the work of Freire stimulates to look at those subjects most disadvantaged by oppressive forces. [Schwendler \(2020\)](#) illustrates how access to popular education on gender and generational conflicts in the peasant family resignifies concepts and practices towards gender equality. [Ruitenber \(2005\)](#), in turn, states that core concepts such as experience, place and community of popular education need to be discussed. Place and place-making is done by the trans-local acknowledging of the ongoing relationship between the local and the global. [Ruitenber\(2005\)](#) therefore proposes community as a community-to-come to be inclusive to others outside the community. [Chaves et al. \(2017\)](#) agree and emphasize that popular education is about seeing diversity as a productive force.

Popular education, finally, includes reflective practice. This stimulates students to look to, and systemically connect with their environment, and to face feelings ([Davies 2012](#)). Elaborating on [Krogh and Jolly \(2012\)](#), the ability to critically reflect does not necessarily mean that young people have to become engaged in peasant agroecology. However, a positive emotional and meaningful relationship with nature is an important premise for undertaking positive acts for preserving biodiversity. The term ‘relationship-based experiential learning’ expresses this insight. [Sobel \(2004; 2019\)](#) finds that students must build a relationship with nature for experiential learning to take place, and states that the ties students have with their community and their natural environment are strengthened by place-based education.

## 2.2. Affect

Freire discusses affect as dialogical: “*The act of love is in committing to your cause. The cause of liberation. But this commitment, because affective, is dialogical ( ...). If I don't love the world, if I don't love life, if I don't love men/women, I can't dialogue*” (Freire in [Brazil 2014](#), p. 24). Freire points at affective abilities that are essential for a dialogue. Specifically, humility and hope are two important features in setting and persisting dialogues for reflection and learning. Hope releases positive energy and humility lets people be open to life experiences in which they both affect and are affected ([Freire 2016](#)).

Various affective modes of being are possible and shape the capacity to act: “*Affect is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include “mental” or ideal bodies)*” ([Deleuze and Guattari 2005](#), p.8). Interpretations of Deleuze's work describe the role of affect in education as a connective element that allows for building relationships ([Cole 2011; Cole and Mirzaei Rafe 2018](#)). Two roles of affect can be distinguished for the purpose of education: 1) undermining authoritarianism, or ‘unmaking’, and 2) developing unexpected social-cultural relationships. Popular education entails both the first and the second role of affect. This article in particular investigates the possibilities of multiple relationships that are being constructed and altered by popular education ([Cole 2011; Cole and Mirzaei Rafe 2018](#)).

Affect is considered a ‘becoming’ - the construction of capacities of any kind of body and other material, social and abstract entities ([Fox and Alldred 2014](#)). All these entities exist in relation to each other and not by itself. A concrete example of how affect shapes the capacity to act is given by [Singh \(2013\)](#). She describes a process of how villagers in Odisha, India regenerate degraded forest by affective, collective labor, environmental care practices and communication among villagers and with nature. Singh notes that in affective labor “*mind and body, reason and passion, intellect and feeling are all employed together*” ([Singh, 2013](#), p. 189). This indicates that being affected, reflection and embodiment all take place at once.

The work of [Sherwood et al. \(2018\)](#) use the example of the Carcelen's Solidarity & Agroecology fair to show how people's abilities to affect and be affected is situated in a specific place. They also describe how a

process of simultaneously being affected, being reflexive, and being embodied can engage a diverse group of people in transgressing boundaries, including rural-urban, peasant-professional and so on. Both [Sherwood \(2018\)](#) and [Singh \(2013\)](#) indicate that the building and strengthening of unexpected relationships in popular education often take place outside formal school settings. In addition, [Singh \(2013\)](#) and also [Cole \(2011\)](#) note that affect and joy are an organizing force. These insights are applied to the cases of three places of learning in Zona da Mata, Minas Gerais, as introduced below.

## 3. Methodology

This multi-modal ([Rose 2011](#)) and multi-sited ([Leonard 2009](#)) ethnographic study was carried out in three municipalities in Zona da Mata, Minas Gerais, Brazil. It includes two years of participatory observations, a selection of 71 audio-visual recordings and 15 audio recordings by the first author. In addition, it analyses 19 films scripted, recorded and edited by youth during film workshops facilitated by the first author, 21 in-depth interviews with educators and students, and a set of educational materials for and by students. The facilitating of film workshops was a request made by the coordinators of the family farming school, youth organizations and rural workers' union to align the research with their interests and to ensure reciprocity between researchers, educators and students. All youth and educators involved in this research provided their informed consent to use the films made by them and to use the audio-visual recordings made by the first author for research purposes. The audio-visual recordings for the films edited by youth were mostly made without the presence of the first-author and facilitator of the film workshops, and disclose issues we may not have witnessed by participatory observations alone ([Goris et al., 2015](#)). The audio-visual recordings made by the first author enabled us to review observation data several times ([Heath et al., 2010](#)). All audio-visual recordings and films were subjected to a content analysis. A selection of three films made by youth and three audio-visual recordings by the first author are discussed in more detail in this article to illustrate the general findings.

### 3.1. Agroecology and popular education in Zona da Mata Mineira

Zona da Mata is situated in the state of Minas Gerais and is part of the Atlantic Forest biome which was historically largely covered by forest. The colonialization of Zona da Mata turned the area into a mining and coffee region. The coffee production grown in monoculture on the hills led to deforestation, deterioration of the soil, lowered water quality and quantity, created dependency on external markets, and led to a loss of food sovereignty ([Cardoso et al., 2001; Botelho et al., 2016](#)). From the 1980s onward, a growing group of peasants in Zona da Mata became engaged in a transition toward agroecology, previously framed as alternative agriculture. It started with peasants discussing their concerns about social and environmental problems and exchanging experiences on what to do in the CEBs. These CEBs were already established during the 1960s ([Botelho et al., 2016; Van den Berg et al., 2018](#)). The meetings of the CEBs take place on the farm and the whole family (including children and youth) participate in these critical bible readings. Since the beginning, popular education on agroecology takes place at various localities. In this research, three places of learning in Zona da Mata, which center on agroecology and which are specifically for young people, are studied in-depth. These are 1) the EFA-Puris in Araponga, 2) PRJ and Ecojovem in Divino and 3) the union school in Espera Feliz.

### 3.2. EFA – Puris in Araponga

Situated in the municipality of Araponga, EFA- Puris is one of 26 *Escolas Famílias Agrícolas (Educação do Campo)* in the state of Minas Gerais ([Vieira 2018](#)). The name of the school makes reference to the Purí indigenous group, as the majority of the population of Araponga are Purí

descendants (Campos, 2006). It is a high school with about 60 students founded in 2008. Gender is registered with the yearly subscription. Fig. 1 shows the gender balance over the years. Overall the school is increasing in number of students. There are more male students than female students and this does not change significantly with the years. The school works with the pedagogy of alternation, where students spend 15 days living and studying at school, and 15 days living and studying in their communities. The school has its own curriculum, but shares subjects of the common basic curriculum such as mathematics and English as well as disciplines appropriate to the reality of the region (Vieira 2018). Their disciplines have to be approved by regional, state and national governments. Special about EFA-Puris is the recurring approval for agroecology as a discipline.

### 3.3. PJR and Ecojovem in Divino

Since the 1940s, rural youth with a religious identity were organized politically in the Agrarian Catholic Youth (JAC) (Silva, 2006; Cerioli 2013). In 1983, the *Pastoral da Juventude Rural* (PJR) was established. PJR is organized in local groups in the countryside and works with the reflection method of Freire, ‘see-judge-act’, and engages with the international peasant movement la Via Campesina (Cerioli 2013). For PJR, spirituality is seen as the force that moves practice. In the municipality of Divino the youth organization PJR is closely working together with the peasant union *Sindicato dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura Familiar* (SINTRAF). The formation school is called Ecojovem. The workshops, events, and popular education on peasant agroecology that PJR and Ecojovem organize together every two months are attended by 10–100 young people aged 14–35. In the organizing team there are more women (7) than men (2).

### 3.4. Escolinha Sindical in Espera Feliz

Every second year the SINTRAF of Espera Feliz organizes a union school for young people, an *Escolinha Sindical*. The union school started in the 1990s but changed over time. Previously, the union school was for union leaders, but since 2004 it aims to engage and educate sons and daughters of union members to ensure a future generation of union leaders. Every two months over a period of two years 20–40 young people come together for a weekend school. In 2018 a group of eight girls and 12 boys started. The curriculum of this union school consists of local culture, *mística*,<sup>1</sup> *terreiro cultural* (cultural encounters), affectivity and sexuality, gender, public policies and economic analysis, unionism, globalization, agroecology, the role of youth in society, and more. These type of union schools are also organized by SINTRAF and other peasant unions in other places in Brazil. Many of these schools introduce agroecology to participants.

## 4. Findings: Affect, relationships, and reflection in popular education practices

### 4.1. EFA – Puris in Araponga

The pedagogical instruments of EFA Puris, following the pedagogy of alternation, include a study plan, excursions, internships, keeping a diary, and carrying out a young professional project (personal livelihood plan for the future), among other things (Vieira 2018). These pedagogical instruments align school time with community time. The students have to study their own lives during community time and present and discuss this later at school. The logic of the school subject’s content follows the themes derived from the reality of the students and not from

<sup>1</sup> *Mística* is a spiritual encounter that unites Christian and Candomblé elements to bring energy, focus and harmony to feel love for a cause (Issa 2007; Hammond 2014).

the schoolbooks. To follow this logic, the plan of the first year includes: “*Puri roots, my family and their work on the land, native plants and animal species, regional access to land, water supply in our region, regional popular cultural events*” (Educational material, study plan 1st year, p1) The study plan for the second year includes studying (self)organizations that support peasant agroecology, specifically “*the rural social movements and support bodies and organizations for family farming in Brazil.*” (Educational material, study plan 2nd year, p1) The plan for the third year includes discussing the role of power agents and public policies, specifically the “*public policies for the countryside.*” (Educational material, study plan 3rd year, p1) The content of the study plans are as much as possible integrated in the school subjects for the common basic curriculum such as history or biology and, where necessary, in extra subjects such as agroecology.

The students at EFA Puris come from conventional and agroecological farms, and from rural towns in the region of Araponga. Students that come from conventional farms show that they are affected by popular education. In interviews they state that they want to use less or no pesticides at their farm, thereby altering their relationship with nature, and their parents’ relationship with nature:

“... and I was thinking about experimenting with agroecological coffee too, as there is a demand for the project here at school. (...) I want to decrease the use of pesticides, trying to have one part with conventional coffee and one part with more agroecological coffee without using agrochemicals.” (Mario, student EFA Puris)

The student refers to the experiments with agroecology, ‘project here at school’ which are part of the homework to do during community time. Another student wants to stop the use of pesticides:

“Now and then my father uses pesticides in the fields and I want to change that ... I will just have technical education here and help him stop using pesticides.” (Igor, student EFA Puris)

Also, relationships among students are built or altered at EFA-Puris. A student from Divino, that graduated at EFA-Puris explains that relationships between students of the same cohort continue via WhatsApp after graduation:

“There is a boy, who graduated with me, he works in Araponga and he participates in the issue of organic coffee, so the same as here at home, it is very difficult to grow coffee, so we are always exchanging. For instance, I send them a coffee plant they say what they need, so we are interacting well, it’s not just gossip as others say.” (Pedro, former student EFA Puris)

Relationships, in which other entities like plants are a part of, continue even though face-to-face meetings are difficult because of the long distances between the municipalities and costs of transportation.

Patriarchal culture causes problems and conflicts at EFA-Puris. The coordinator states that the female students are still very submissive and she wonders whether this is because of fear or not. A female student refers to machismo by male students and to the role of the educators:

“Sometimes boys are more macho: ‘no, you may leave it, let us handle it.’ Girls don’t need to do this but sometimes the monitor says: no, even a little, she has to do it. Because if she doesn’t do the practice on the ground, how will they learn? So it depends on the monitor.” (Carol, student EFA Puris)

The attitude toward girls and women is also constraining the girls who want to do field experiments (homework) at their homes during the community time. The student describes how her father talks to her when she wants to convince him to use no pesticides:

“... he says: what’s this girl? You know nothing, let me use my product here that I know. No, dad, but you will kill the plant. Oh no, that is good for the plant. However, comparing with amount that he used in the past, nowadays he uses a lot less.” (Carol, student EFA Puris)

Words, like ‘kill’ used by the student reveal affection toward the

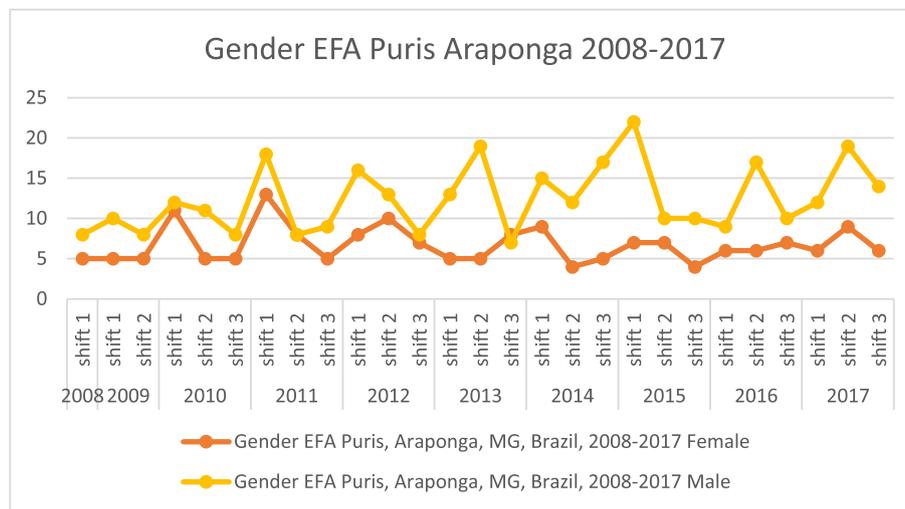


Fig. 1. Gender balance EFA Puris 2008–2017 (Goris, 2021).

plant and a process of reflection. On the one hand, the example illustrates how patriarchal relations make it more difficult to do agroecological experiments at home. On the other hand, enacting affect coupled with reflection may engage the parents in a transformation process. The student affirms that her father uses fewer pesticides nowadays. She notes that this is partly due to the use of the brushcutter:

“... he does not need to use poison to trim weeds or tidy up the land”

Importantly, she also sees this as a result of her education:

“When you study you know that poison is harmful, so I try to help my family by saying so”

Two relationships are unexpectedly altered. First, as a result of her education on pesticides, dialogues within the family are promoted, altering the daughter-father relationship. And, second the relationship of the father with nature is altered by more environmentally just farming practices.

Another female student noted that not all boys internalized the household tasks at the school that are equally divided among boys and girls. She refers to her brother who also attends EFA-Puris:

“At the EFA he does, he washes the pans, he makes coffee, he washes the dishes, but at home he doesn't do these tasks. (...) it's something that comes from the family and the family also has to put forward this, educate, that the boys can contribute.” (Renate, student EFA Puris).

Heteropatriarchal culture is also visible with regard to LGBTs. A female student noted:

“I said: homophobic because I thought he was biased with our friend there (...) I think the school is ready to receive (LGBT students), the students not. (Carol, student EFA Puris)

The stories of the students problematize heteropatriarchal culture. The students become acquainted with other values at school but at the same time reproduce inequalities at home. Concerning this subject, it is pertinent to align popular education within the families and communities with popular education at schools such as EFA-Puris.

One way young people want to align popular education at school and in the community is via intentional leisure activities. A graduate student of EFA-Puris foresees opportunities to talk about agroecology at local soccer competitions that he organizes:

“You have to use the means that are more pleasing to youth. Why go to a crowded room just to hear someone passing a lecture? I will personally go, but I do not like it. So this is our proposal, to seek the easiest ways. (Lucas, graduate student EFA Puris)”

Film-making also appeared to be an easy way to align popular education at school with popular education within the family and community. The films made during the community time create mediated dialogues when viewed during school time. The film ‘Nos caminhos da Agroecologia/In the pathways of agroecology’ #1 is made by a group of three female and three male students of EFA-Puris and shows how young people are affected by people's interactions with nature. In the film they are walking at the farm talking about agroecology. Fig. 2 portrays a girl worried when she is talking about the use of agrochemicals in conventional agriculture and Fig. 3 depicts the hope they have in agroecology. The film ends with five of them yelling ‘Agroecology is life’ (Fig. 3). Fig. 3 also shows how the making-of the film as part of the curriculum alters the relationships between the students and that they experience hope in the relationships built with peers. The personal stories on agroecology by the young filmmakers of ‘Nos caminhos da agroecologia/In the pathways of agroecology’ show the interconnection of affection with nature, for instance when one of them talks about the well-being of



Fig. 2. Frame from the film ‘Nos caminhos da agroecologia/In the pathways of agroecology’ (Film made by youth #1).



Fig. 3. Frame from the film 'Nos caminhos da agroecologia/In the pathways of agroecology' (Film made by youth #1).

nature. 'Bem-estar/Well-being' is a word mostly used when referred to people but in the film, she uses the word to refer to nature:

*"Agroecology, she works with ecological management of natural resources prioritizing the diversity among the cultures. Not working with monoculture, that is the planting of a single plant, but doing intercropping, crop rotations, aiming at the well-being of nature and the people who live around because it does not only work with plants, but with society."*

Audio-visual recording #14 of a school-presentation on a personal livelihood plan on agroecological coffee shows that fellow students engage each other in a transformative learning process. In the recording, one of the students asks a colleague:

*"Do you plan to grow your coffee conventional or organic? Agroecological? Why?"*

Another fellow student asks:

*"But look people, you know that for agroecological coffee you need to diversify but if you see this photo" (she is pointing at the photo in the power point presentation of her colleague, depicting coffee in a monoculture system)*

At one point the educator asks: *"Who benefits from this coffee?"*

During the entire session, the educator sits among the students and most of the time just listens (Fig. 4). The educator is the last person on the right. Fig. 4 shows that the power balance between educators and students is altered, showing the first role of affect 'undermining authoritarianism' (Cole 2011). Dialogue as a method of popular education is internalized by the students to discuss different understandings of reality. The fact that the students come from conventional and agroecological farms does not stand in between them. Affect and reflection are enacted at the same time.



Fig. 4. Course setting, educator (mentor at EFA) sits among the students (audio-visual recording made by first author # 14).

#### 4.2. PJR and Ecojovem in Divino

Ecojovem is described as a union school. The union school often collaborates with PJR to arrange workshops. A recurring theme in the curriculum of Ecojovem and its activities organized with PJR is peasant culture. One of the coordinators explains how they want to engage and affect young people:

*"This year we were more focused on the formation in culture, to strengthen the peasant identity, right, of the person being proud of being rural youth, proud to find out about their roots."* (Geusa, coordinator PJR and Ecojovem)

The workshops PJR and Ecojovem organize often respond to requests from people, varying from making ecological sanitary products to restoration of a spring by bringing and planting seedlings. The workshops provide the young people with experiences that assemble their concerns, needs, and feelings with reflections and joint action among peers.

A national meeting of PJR in Laginha, Minas Gerais, from 14 to 20 January 2018 revealed how young people are affected by exposing them to experiences that involve head, heart and hands that are linked to their realities. The meeting consisted of *mística's*,<sup>2</sup> church services, presentations and discussions on politics and economics at national and international levels, feminism, political alliances of PJR, workshops varying from making bamboo baskets, massage, cooperatives, medicinal plants and mandalas and the socialization of the workshops, discussion on ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. Religious diversity is an issue. A female organizer of PJR/Ecojovem notes that ecumenism is often interpreted as a dialogue between six (Christian) religions, while this should be about a dialogue between religions, considering Afro-Brazilian religions such as Candomblé and Umbanda which some of the PJR youth (also) adhere to.

The minutes of the national meeting show the diversity in terms of gender and sexual orientation: *"Of the 47 enrolled and accredited 25 were male and 22 female. With regard to sexual orientation 40 declared themselves heterosexual, 1 lesbian and 1 bisexual (5 did not declare sexual orientation)"* (PJR, 2017, p1). Yet the report of the meeting describes machismo during a game at the "cultural evening" and explains how they addressed the problem: *"However, there were some messages that were very macho, as we realized we started reading and consequently filtering these messages, and warned that messages of this nature would not be read"* (PJR, 2017, p 6–7).

The female coordinator of Ecojovem/PJR notes that gender is a difficult topic because the young people hardly received any formation on this matter at home. However, they do not avoid the subject and PJR Divino/Ecojovem organized a weekend on 4–5 March 2017 on gender issues. They combined the weekend with a local soccer competition to prevent competition among the local activities and focused on rural youth, a shared identity. The weekend consisted of *mística's*, church service, presentation on gender, peasant culture and identity of rural youth, the soccer competition, cultural events and various workshops such as climbing, dancing, and filming. In addition to the presentation on gender, they planned mixed-gender soccer matches. One of the female organizers notes that the presentation about gender was mainly on labor and financial autonomy of young women was hardly addressed. She says that many things are still taboo, such as abortion and other topics related to sexuality. By combining the weekend on gender issues with a local soccer competition and rural culture they engage around 90 youngsters (also from the city and from conventional farms) in a community-to-come of young agroecologists. Also, here (unexpected) relationships emerged, further engaging young people in a process of being affected and reflecting. A report on Facebook, called "leisure with intentionality", summarizes it as follows: *"with our soccer and dodgeball*

<sup>2</sup> In Brazil, the racial category "Blacks" is the result of the union of two official racial categories: *preto*/Black and *pardo*/Brown.

everyone wins, some with soccer shoes, sneakers, ...many barefoot, men and women together, supporting each other, breaking with the circle of individualism and of competition, little gestures to construct the society that we want.” (Agroecologia em Divino Facebook site, 6/03/2017). This type of popular education, ‘intentional leisure’, turned out to be an inclusive way to engage young people from conventional farms and rural cities to become acquainted with agroecology and gender issues.

The film ‘*De onde vem a comida?*’/Where does food come from?’ # 14 made by organizers of PJR and Ecojovem portrays how (unexpected) relationships are built. The film is a docu-soap with cartoon clouds with text. The images in the film depict a young man shaking his head dismissively when his mother is putting oil from the supermarket on his plate (Fig. 5). The young man starts to reflect (Fig. 6) and searches for information on the internet. He finds out about the existence of Ecojovem (Fig. 7). He clearly finds it a bit exciting to join Ecojovem as he is seen to walk very slowly, with some hesitance to a meeting of Ecojovem (Fig. 8). After joining Ecojovem, you see images of him working in a diversified agricultural system (Fig. 9). The film ends with images of him and a woman with a food basket in front of the union flag of SINTRAF with their fists clenched, symbolizing the struggle for peasant agroecology (Fig. 10). The film shows the constructing and altering of various (unexpected) relationships, the young man’s relationship with food, farming and nature, and with the people of PJR and Ecojovem. Fig. 10 shows companionship. The film uses moments of being affected, reflection and enacting new relationships to tell its story. However the portrayal of the mother serving her son food does reproduce patriarchal relationships.

The video recordings #33 and #34 of ‘*Mostra cultural*’ show joy as an organizing force and young people having fun together. They depict a regional youth meeting of PJR, organized by PJR Divino and PJR Espera Feliz, 22–23 April 2017 to celebrate peasant culture and to strengthen the ties among them. The youth took the opportunity to go on the streets of the town of Espera Feliz to make their voices heard. The video recordings show young people wearing t-shirts with political logos, playing instruments and singing songs about young people protesting. The images demonstrate how an organization as PJR/Ecojovem together with other organizations in the region build relationships and collective agency by way of these regional meetings. These are the same people of PJR Minas Gerais, who together with other peasant organizations later that year blocked two highways (BR116 and BR265) in the region against PEC 287 (Constitutional Amendmend Proposal to reform the pension system). The young people are affected at local and regional meetings of PJR by popular education, and this simultaneously generates reflection and the capacity to jointly act.

#### 4.3. Escolinha Sindical in Espera Feliz

A group of students with mixed backgrounds attended the union school of 2018–2020. The group included eight girls and 12 boys, 13



Fig. 5. Frame of the film ‘*De onde vem a comida?*’/Where does food come from?’ (Film made by youth #14).



Fig. 6. Frame of the film ‘*De onde vem a comida?*’/Where does food come from?’ (Film made by youth #14).



Fig. 7. Frame of the film ‘*De onde vem a comida?*’/Where does food come from?’ (Film made by youth #14).



Fig. 8. Frame of the film ‘*De onde vem a comida?*’/Where does food come from?’ (Film made by youth #14).



Fig. 9. Frame of the film ‘*De onde vem a comida?*’/Where does food come from?’ (Film made by youth #14).



Fig. 10. Frame of the film ‘*De onde vem a comida?*’/Where does food come from?’ (Film made by youth #14).

blacks<sup>3</sup>, seven Whites. Many of them came from the settlements of agrarian reform ‘*Padre Jesus*’ and ‘*Boa Vista*’. This group is the result of active mobilization of youth through home visits and organized transport from the settlements and other remote neighborhood communities to the union school. One of the coordinators of the union school explains why they organized this school:

*“The purpose of the school is to train leaders to be active in the movement ... but also to build awareness.”* (Amanda, coordinator union school)

The union presents the learning process as a rite of passage to become political actors and as the building of relationships with each other and with the union to create collective agency:

*“The school is meant to involve young people, the children of the (farmer) members (of the union). During training, young people will understand the processes of organizing unions and cooperatives. Just like other themes that will help them. They are in the bloom of youth and they have many questions. So, we work with several themes: equality, affectivity and sexuality, and commitment and responsibility. That will help them at this stage they are in, the transition, from adolescence to youth, to a more mature phase. So this is the process of the school. The idea is that after this formation the young people will understand this process and that they become part of our institutions, the union, the cooperatives, the association.”* (Alessandra, coordinator of the union)

The school starts with a meeting for students and their parents. The students wrote down in small groups their expectations of the union school:

*“This training is a moment that we can disconnect from virtual reality and acquire new knowledge; we hope to have a moment that we can watch movies that have to do with the theme and that we can relax with popcorn. Also we want to sport and have educational games throughout the formation process and cultural nights. The formation of groups for debates is a way that facilitates our interaction because we feel more comfortable to express our opinions.”* (student, audio recording #11)

Their expectations show intentional leisure, i.e. combining leisure activities with reflecting upon various issues. The students are straightforward when they are asked about their future on the countryside. When the educator asks if anyone wants to leave the countryside, except temporarily for a study, all reply at once “no”. The educator then emphasizes that they should study so that they can occupy the places that the older generation could not.

The theme of the first weekend of the union school in 2018 was peasant culture, indigenous culture and African culture. The educators recognize the variety of cultures among the youth. Difference within the territory becomes an asset to learn from and aligns with place and diversity as an anchor. The educator for this weekend, Manoel, is a well-known Black musician and storyteller. He is a popular educator who knows a lot about the cultures represented in the group. He knows the families and he makes connections between the general story and their personal stories, valuing the peasant life and work of the students and their families. The following dialogue shows the importance of a local educator, familiar with the local youth to be able to affect young people in ways that value their families, farming and cultures:

Educator: “You know how many different kinds of beans your father has?”

Student: “10?”

Educator: “Double it.”

Student: “20?”

Educator: “Double it.”

Student: “40?”

Educator: “Yes, 41 kinds of beans.”

These kind of interactions in popular education alter the relationship young people have with their parents, food, farming and cultures. To explore their own cultures, the students make presentations in small groups by writing a song, preparing a theatre play, or making drawings. The texts, drawings and performances reveal the process of reflection

within the small groups. To illustrate, they wrote the following text by a drawing on a tradition to call for rain after a long discussion:

*“Our trees are our culture and are part of our traditions”.* (text with drawing)

The text shows that the young people reflect on their relationship with nature, thereby challenging the boundary between nature and culture. Another group writes a song when they are asked about how to keep alive the cultural manifestations in their communities:

“Celebration of Saint John

Today is the day of Saint John, I’ll do my Canjica, and arrive there. Come here partying with us.

If you like, at night there will be a camp fire, will have a dance here all night, raising dust. Call your partner and come here to dance.

And when I see, young people are already involved, enjoying, helping, organizing the flags, dancing forró all night with friends.” (Song made by students)

In the song ‘Celebration of Saint John’ the young people couple responsibility for cultural manifestations, e.g. the making of the traditional food ‘Canjica’ with joy, to dance ‘forró’.

Not everyone appreciated the celebration of Saint John at the union school equally. An issue strongly addressed at the weekend evaluation by some of the students is that not all young people participated in the entire cultural event. At the start everybody joined, marched singing with the flag, dancing around the fire, but at one point some of them left the party.

Student: “I think the cultural night is for everybody and, let’s say, it can be a thing you don’t like to do, but the next one will be something that you do like and other people don’t like very much, but all are invited to participate because here we are a collective.”

Educator: “The coordination will review this (...)”

Student: “It is not the coordination, each one, each one should reflect on this! Because I think that we are here to open our mindsets and that can lead you to things to learn and to appropriate.”

This last quote demonstrates how the student affects the relationship educator-student when she says “It is not the coordination, (...) each one should reflect on this”. The relationship becomes more horizontal. The students also points at humility, to be open to be affected. Another issue discussed in the weekend evaluation is racism. A female Black educator denounced racism. She is not pointing at a student in particular, but discussing and condemning it in general:

*“There are two things that can’t happen between us and that we expect at the next meeting not to happen. These are ‘piadinhas’ (jokes) and nicknames. That we, people, are human beings, but we are all different. So the surname is already enough. These kinds of nicknames like ‘choquito’ (black chocolate), ‘mandioquinha’ (small cassava - cassava has a brown peel), I’m just giving an example, I’m not saying that anybody called anybody that kind of nickname. (...) We cannot tolerate these types of nicknames. Why? Sometimes a colleague calls me ‘de neguinha’ (term for Black people perceived as racist), I act naturally because I identify myself as Black. But sometimes my colleague calls Diana ‘de neguinha’, she won’t like it, because she doesn’t like, she doesn’t like it, she got her name. Right, Diana isn’t ‘neguinha’.”* (Alessandra, coordinator of the union)

The story shows how the Black educators are affected by what happens at the union school, and how this results in sharing their concerns and reflections with the students - thereby making anti-racism part of the curriculum of popular education on agroecology.

At the weekend students also explored and acknowledged the struggles of peasants and peasant agroecology movements in the past. They talked for instance about mining in the region and its consequences. They studied the peasant movements by holding up a popular political piece of artwork, a large quilt made of different t-shirts of social movements, and were asked to describe what they saw. Subsequently,

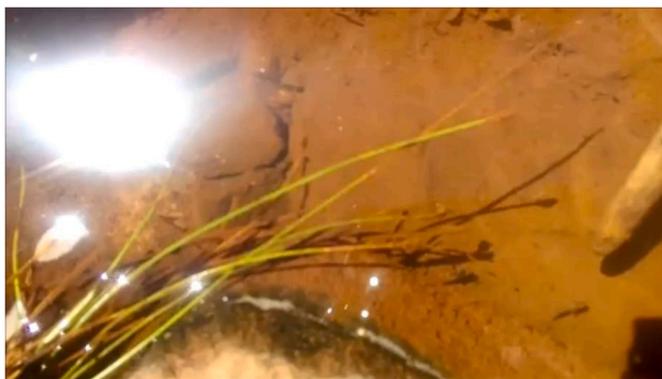


Fig. 11. Frame from nature film without title #18.

the educator elaborated on what they saw, and students would add to the story of the educator by sharing their own life experiences, making sense of their common history. Together, in this way educators and students produced knowledge about their histories, and became aware of the important role these movements played and continue to play. The experience deepens the relationships of youth with their union and social movements.

The film without title #18 shows how students deepen their relationship with, and experience of, nature. In their film blog, three girls of the union school are exploring a reforestation of land by their family. One of the girls points at the banana trees present in the forest. The girls are enthusiastic about how crystal clear the water is at the spring and point with a wooden stick at a beautiful little fish in the water (Fig. 11). They note how cool, literally and metaphorically, it is in the forest.

*“Look, how cool it is here, do you feel, to the extent that I have it cold. Let’s call Sergio to camp here”.* (character in the film without title #18)

The film shows how the young girls are affected by the forest.

## 5. Discussion

The methods of popular education mobilize affect to engage youth and their communities in agroecology. First, the pedagogy of alternation plays an important role in dispersing affect and altering relationships between students, their parents and community (also see Ribeiro, 2008). The study in the community time and experiments on students’ own farms create a space to discuss agroecology with their parents and other family members. This creates affective and situated abilities to discuss farming practices and the relationship with nature within families and communities. The peasant family is a place of both cooperation and conflict (Sen 1990), and the assignments during the community time promote dialogues within the families. Accordingly, our results support Schwendler’s (2020) argument that hierarchical gender structures and intergenerational conflicts in family spaces can be confronted in dialogues induced through popular education.

Second, the variety of topics addressed at the three learning sites ensure that farm work, community and home life all become part of the curriculum and therefore are all affected. The work of McCune et al. (2017) pointed at the break with the rigorous separation of work and home life. Adding to the work of McCune, attention to household tasks, farm work, health care, sport and cultural activities means a transition toward equally valuing reproduction and production. It is the beginning of a transition toward a shared responsibility for reproduction by men and women. The gender conflict however is still a sensitive topic and many issues remain taboo.

Third, intentional leisure activities can also be identified as a method of popular education that appeals to youth and stimulates affect. In line with the work of Sherwood et al. (2018) and Anderson et al. (2019a,b), it shows that any place can be intentionally used for building relationships

and learning, including for example a soccer field. As our work demonstrates, and in agreement with Singh (2013), joy indeed turned out to be an organizing force. An important asset of popular education is thus the coupling of enjoyment with learning.

In this research we systematized the findings on the role of affect in developing expected and unexpected relationships that support the broad uptake, or scaling out, of agroecology. We found that affective relationships, friendships that emerge in peer-to-peer learning, and the alteration of power and language in peer-to-peer learning create a place for dialogue - much in line with the ideas of Freire (2014). Young people who hold different views on agriculture (i.e. youth from agroecological farms, from conventional farms, and from rural towns) have become engaged in dialogues about their reality. Popular education also addresses and alters the human relationship with nature. In the encounter with nature by exploring forests, experimenting with agroecology, and restoring springs, among other things, joy and other positive feelings are mobilised. The magnificence of nature, the pleasant climate it can offer and a feeling of mutual cooperation among living and non-living things are all affects that are mobilised in popular education. Moreover, reflection is employed simultaneously with affect. The film made at the forest shows how the girls are happily surprised and indicate the construction of nature literacy, the reintroduction of “*other inter-related multiple literacies*” (Cole and Mirzaei Rafe 2018, p. 52). Finally, new relationships between educators and students are constructed that value the knowledges and experiences of the students. Students’ knowledge and experiences are included in the learning process and subject to reflection, while educators position themselves as facilitators of dialogue.

The practices of popular education we studied demonstrate that this social pedagogy is an example of an anti-authoritarian pedagogy (Cole and Mirzaei Rafe 2018). This does not mean that these learning practices are a power-free utopia but, rather, that power relations are intentionally changed (Hooks 1994). New relationships are constructed to support a community-to-come (Ruitenberg 2005), a community of people that welcomes youth from conventional farms and rural towns and that invites family and the neighborhood to become familiar with peasant agroecology. Even so, other affective modes of being inhibit transformation, such as racist jokes. The principle of ‘unlearning in order to learn’ (McCune et al., 2017) is thus relevant and calls for reflection to reveal how racism, homophobia, or lack of religious debate may inhibit new relationships and the capacity for action. Thus Junqueira (2009) noticed that school settings reproduce male and heteronormative norms, yet at the same time play a fundamental role in dismantling these. This exposure and disruption of unjust practices is characteristic for transformative learning (Peters and Wals 2016). Transforming affective relationships is moreover difficult because young people are not only affected at school, in the union school or youth organization, but they are also affected at their homes, at agricultural merchandizing among others. Transformation thus requires time and repetition (Deleuze 2011). For example, the existence of feminist groups in the municipality can make a difference in young people taking up the gender issue (Goris et al., 2019).

This study contributes to the debate on popular education by visualizing the role of affect in the development of expected and unexpected relationships (Cole 2011; Cole and Mirzaei Rafe 2018) by making explicit that these relationships can include people’s relationships with nature, and acknowledging that this role is intertwined with another role of affect that is the undermining of authoritarianism in pedagogy. Learning experiences are often reduced to educators teaching students in a hierarchical setting referred to by the banking model of education as an instrument of oppression (Freire 1968) and by authoritarianism in pedagogy that serves market interests (Cole and Mirzaei Rafe 2018). By experiencing affect in popular education, the ability to affect and to be affected, to augment or diminish abilities, young people become aware of their personal and collective agency to build a more just and sustainable society.

## 6. Conclusion

Freire's pedagogical ideas have influenced popular education systems all over the world (Godonoo, 1998; Cacho, 2018). Although popular education on agroecology at public schools has emerged in all regions of Brazil, it is still the exception, and it is further hampered by the current austerity measures (Van den Berg et al., 2019). At the same time, popular education in agroecology plays an important role in processes of repeasantization and in scaling out agroecology (Anderson et al., 2019; Cacho, 2018). This article shows how popular education values and is able to resignify peasants cultures. Moreover, it shows popular education is able to introduce new agroecological practices that simultaneously support processes of repeasantization and agroecology. EFA-Puris in Araponga, PJR and Ecojovem in Divino and the union school in Espera Feliz each year connect and engage 40 to 120 (young) people in peasant agroecology in the Zona da Mata, Minas Gerais. It is promising that popular education not only engages young people in a transformation process but also engages their families and communities by building unexpected relationships. Acknowledging that young people are also affected by, and learn from, their family, is a pedagogical method that works both ways.

The focus and strength of EFA-Puris in Araponga is formal education in agroecological farming practices and the common high school curriculum to enable students to continue studying afterwards. PJR and Ecojovem succeed in engaging a large group of young people through experiences that affect them and assemble joy, spirituality, activism and peasant culture; moreover, the focal point of the union school is to ensure successors who coordinate the local union, cooperatives and other agroecological associations in the future. All three learning practices contribute to collective agency. They enhance the situated abilities of students to collectively organize themselves, and to disrupt unjust practices, norms and structures. Part of the situated abilities consist of the relationships built among the young students. Regional and national youth meetings to organize young people within social movement organizations strengthen these relationships. These relationships constitute the base to organize overt and rightful resistance at regional and national level (Van den Berg et al., 2019). Coherence in everyday practices of resistance in the three forms of popular education studied, as well as in regional and national youth meetings, create the repetition that is necessary to set new norms, including for example gender equality.

The three popular education sites presented in this article show that this type of education engages youth in agroecology through affect. Affect ensures the building and altering of relationships between people and between people and nature. This relationality is essential to agroecology as well. Where necessary, injustice is directly exposed in popular education. The main message of popular education for agroecology however is to learn how to do things differently. Creating dialogue between students and parents as well as between different social groups by making space for new relationships and mobilizing joy are important ways to get there. As such, the use of affect and dialogue in popular education have the power to support processes of repeasantization and to initiate broader agroecological transformations (Goris et al., 2019; Van den Berg et al., 2018; Meek, 2014; Cacho, 2018).

### Credit author statement

Margriet Goris: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. Ivonete Silva Lopes: Resources, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Gerard Verschoor: Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Jelle Behagel: Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Maria Izabel Vieira Botelho: Resources, Writing – review & editing.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.08.003>.

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