

Escola Familia: A proposal
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Article abstract

Alfabetização (literacy) of young children involves a school exclusively devoted to the early years, parental participation, and teachers specialized in early literacy. This is the basis of José Carani's proposal for an *escola familia* in the municipality of Cambé (Brazil). This *Note from the Field*, based on our conversations with José, relates his proposal to the Canadian context.

ESCOLA FAMILIA: A PROPOSAL

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ABSTRACT. *Alfabetização* (literacy) of young children involves a school exclusively devoted to the early years, parental participation, and teachers specialized in early literacy. This is the basis of José Carani's proposal for an *escola família* in the municipality of Cambé (Brazil). This *Note from the Field*, based on our conversations with José, relates his proposal to the Canadian context.

ESCOLA FAMILIA: PROPOSITION

RÉSUMÉ. L'*alfabetização* (l'alphabétisation) des jeunes enfants nécessite une école exclusivement consacrée à la petite enfance, un engagement parental et des enseignants spécialisés dans l'alphabétisation précoce. Ce sont les fondements d'une proposition de José Carani pour une *escola família*, située dans la municipalité de Cambé, au Brésil. Inspirée de nos discussions avec José, cette *Note du terrain* transpose ses recommandations au contexte canadien.

While recently in Brazil, visiting elementary and secondary schools, and meeting with teachers, students and directors, we had occasion to enter into lively discussion around education with José Carani.



Professor José Carani

This *Note from the Field* presents his proposal for educational change in elementary schooling in the small community of Cambé, which is located in the province of Parana, in the south of Brazil. Cambé is a municipality of approximately 100,000 people situated close to the city of Londrina. Cambé's economy has been mainly rural, but it is presently transitioning to an urban economy. Professor Carani's proposal is aimed at fundamental public education for young children; fundamental education (in the Brazilian sense) corresponds to elementary education in Canada. Soares (2004) identifies five levels of Brazilian education: "Infant, Fundamental, Secondary, Higher and Postgraduate Education" (p. 69). In fact, as will be seen, the proposal is aimed at the first three years of elementary education (Grades 1-3).

Most middle- and higher-income parents in Brazil send their children to private schools, where they benefit from ideal conditions to achieve the kind of education that will allow them to pass the challenging entrance exam required for university admission (Hunter & Subiyama, 2009). In Brazil, post-secondary education in public universities is free, so in theory available to all. Among the Latin American countries, Brazil devotes the greatest proportion of its education budget to public post-secondary education (World Bank, 2011). As a proportion of its GDP, its spending on higher education is among the highest in the world. For instance, of the almost 5% of its GDP that Brazil allocates for education, up to 25% has been devoted to post-secondary education, which only serves 2 percent of the student population (Hunter & Sugiyama, 2009). There is a pledge by political leaders to increase the amount to 10% (World Bank, 2011) along with the intention to devote more funds to "tempo integrale" or full-day schooling in Brazil's elementary public schools (Santos, 2014). However, the problem remains of perpetuating the "Matthew effect" (Stanovich, 1986), whereby the literacy-rich become richer (viz., go on to university and to careers) and the literacy-poor (parents and children alike) are deprived of the means to overcome their condition and achieve a decent standard of living. There remain "wide variations" among regions in terms of quality of education (Luna & Klein, 2006, p. 185). Socio-economic status has been identified as one of the main culprits for these disparities: "the students' socio-economic status, mainly when it is considered at school level, is by far the factor with the biggest impact on their school results" (Soares, 2004, p. 79). There is an urgent need to pay attention to the *alfabetização* (literacy) needs of many young children attending Brazil's public schools.

José Carani is retired from university teaching, but not from education. He is actively involved in initiatives and projects focused on access to and quality of education in Brazil. Over the course of his life, he has been a teacher, a director of secondary school and a director of Normal School (teacher formation) in Cambé in addition to having been a professor of Exact Sciences in the State University of Londrina. He brings an invaluable wealth of expertise in working at different levels within the public educational system. It is heartening to

encounter dedicated people in other cities in the Americas who are looking for creative solutions to educational challenges in their own contexts. We (the co-authors) are all interested in participatory and positive approaches to education, in literacy (over the lifespan), and in teaching and learning that will benefit those in disadvantaged conditions, especially young children. In our recent conversations with José, we discovered that a common question that animated all of us, each in our own way, focused on what can be done to improve the literacy education of socio-economically disadvantaged children. Under which conditions might their learning be facilitated and consolidated? How can intrinsic motivation towards literacy learning be instilled from their early years including through the use of stories of hope? How can young children transform into self-regulated literacy learners? How can teachers best be supported to support children's literacy learning? And how can other adults in the community (e.g., parents, extended family) also be supported in literacy learning?

Brazil is considered as "one of the world's best laboratories for generating global evidence on what works in education" (World Bank, 2011, p. 100). This is because, even though there may be room for improvement, there is also much evidence of creative proposals for change. Creative change in education in Brazil has a history of happening at the municipal and state levels, with each working in collaboration with the another. One example of this in the area of literacy is the implementation of a statewide primary grade literary teaching initiative (*Alfabetização no Tempo Certo*) in concert with municipalities so as to strengthen student learning (World Bank, 2011). Where there is a will there is a way.

José Carani has proposed a plan to benefit the community of Cambé as a whole. He has been talking about his proposal with many in his environs, at various levels of government as well as with colleagues in education from various levels (e.g., Bertan, 2014). His proposal has been the focus of the local news (Ogama, 2014). Hearing of his proposal, his optimism was contagious, and we decided to share his ideas in turn, hoping that by doing so it could inspire José's efforts, our own, and others' projects.

SELENA AND HER FAMILY

Improving literacy does not need to mean investing millions upon millions of dollars. Not only is this not a pragmatic answer but with it potentially comes a loss of control on the part of the central actors, that is, by students and their families. The groundwork for literacy begins in the home and with the involvement of the family. The school must be brought to the community rather than the community to the school. This is the crux of José Carani's proposal as he explained it. A school dedicated to the first three years of elementary school (Grades 1 to 3) should be created in the community. The

school needs to be small and locally situated so as to apply directly to the needs of the immediate populace. The school must be understood as belonging to the local families through what José Carani calls “*minha escola*” (translated as: “my school”). It should be a space reserved expressly for the local learning community; even as it focuses on teaching and learning of literacy in the early years, as a centre, it is there to serve the entire community, including the literacy needs of the adults.

In a recent interview with the local press (*Jornal Nossa Cidade*, 2014), José Carani told the story of Selena (fictitious name), a young girl attending elementary school in Cambé (Ogama, 2014). Selena’s grandparents saw their granddaughter being promoted from one grade to another but without evidence of her learning how to read and write. Dissatisfied with this situation, the grandparents finally asked the support of the local education authorities in addressing their concerns. This story was only one of many that José Carani has heard over the years, especially from poverty-stricken families, who often lack the means or literacy skills to help their children in school. Improvement in education generally happens on the level of the state or municipality, which are presently primarily responsible for education (World Bank, 2011). In Cambé, evidence exists of the strong willingness on the part of families to actively participate in *alfabetização*, culture and citizenship. This willingness constitutes a fertile ground for José Carani’s proposal.

CAIS: PROPOSAL FOR *ESCOLA FAMILIA*

Through conversation during, before and after meals, often at the kitchen table but equally on the road and while touring local sights, José Carani shared his ideas of what is needed to address the problem encountered with the *alfabetização* of Cambé’s children. The conversation was conducted in Portuguese. At a certain point, notes were taken and the main ideas were then translated into English. We have retained some of the particular Brazilian terms used by José Carani in his plan for an *escola familia*. That plan is based on the five following principles. Those principles, which are intended to guide decision-making processes, are ones he identified as attributes of an evolving system. The principles / attributes are interdependent, each relying on the other for actualization. They are:

1. Believability (*creer*)
2. Reliability (*confivael*)
3. Feasibility (*viavel*)
4. Equity (*impartialidade*)
5. Self-adjustability (*auto-ajustavel*)

Each of the principles is briefly explained.

Believability needs to be based on an analysis of the local socio-economic reality in order to arrive at goals that are attainable and can be actualized in the

community. A plan for change needs to be grounded in the actual milieu in which the supporting actors (parents, students, families) live. The people involved in the process must share in the belief that the proposed plan for *alfabetização* in their schools is possible to initiate, achieve, support and maintain. For instance, actual obstacles need to be identified so as to be addressed as part of the planning process.

Reliability follows from the belief of the actors involved in the attainability of the project goals. The participants to the project need to believe in its possibility and in the ability to actualize its possibility. They must believe that the goal will remain the same and not be subject to arbitrary change or to personal interests. The project needs to be designed and conducted in such a way that it becomes something that they can trust and rely upon in the achievement of the goals.

Feasibility means that given positive experiences, there will be a desire to see these experiences continue. Such positive experiences are also dependent on the availability and sustainability of resources: from the municipality and/or state; pedagogical; community-based.

Equity needs to be the motivating principle of the project, with the understanding actualized that the project is just and good for all: just, in that it is not prejudicial (i.e., no one will suffer) but is in the greater good of all; good in that all participants are beneficiaries and, further, will benefit in function of their needs.

Self-adjustability means that those participating (teachers, families, parents, students) can influence and adjust the project direction, goals, design, etc. so as to meet their needs and their degree of satisfaction with the project. The project needs to be flexible in design and actualization, responsive to the perceptions and views of the participants, with changes made according to contingencies encountered.

CAIS (Centro de Alfabetização é Interação Social) is the name that José Carani has provisionally given to this project. The title means Centre for Literacy and Social Interaction. Its name communicates its main goals. The general objective of CAIS would be *alfabetização* in a full-time setting (*tempo integral*) for public fundamental (elementary) education. Its primary objective is to involve the family in the education of their children and to meaningfully engage parents in the governance and administration of their local school. While some parents are already involved in their children's learning, many are not, thus the need for more concerted action in this area. As Soares (2004) also reiterated, the family plays a key role in a child's education, "therefore every school should try hard to involve the parents in the education of their children by reading to them, supervising their homework and developing their motivation for studying" (p. 84). CAIS's second objective, which further

extends the involvement of family, would be to construct a profile of the parents of the children—their schooling history and degree of literacy. Part of CAIS' goal could then be to also provide literacy education for the parents, if needed, along with their children, this so that they can support each other's efforts and maintain motivation. CAIS's third objective would be to provide social support to children and their parents, for instance, by assisting a father in finding work who had just lost his job. The social worker at the school would help connect him with a social worker working for the city who has links to various employers or agencies for employment. While there are many aspects to be considered in creating such a space to support *alfabetização*, we focus here on three that José Carani discussed in depth: curriculum, parental involvement, and teacher formation.

CURRICULUM

Alfabetização involves not only learning to read and write and work with numbers but developing one's intellectual capacity. This comprises the basis for a socio-constructivist, hands-on approach to learning subjects in school (math, science, literature, etc) through learning how to participate in a culture. In the first year of school at an *escola família*, a child would learn how to read and write: to recognize letters and words and numbers, to learn how to write letters and words and numbers, to learn strategies for reading words. In the second year, a child would build on this knowledge by learning more about how to interpret what they are reading and writing through responding to texts, such as through: asking questions, making predictions, articulating reasons for their preferences (likes/dislikes), and identifying story elements (characters, setting, plot). They would develop these interpretive skills with their teachers, peers (in their class and in the school) as well as with their families, including by writing short texts, so as to develop the cognitive framework within which to organize what they are hearing, listening to, and encountering. In the third year, a child would compose longer messages, create stories and transmit information so as to further extend their understanding. José Carani also emphasized the importance of all three grades being in one small school, rather than in an elementary school of up to (8) grades (which is the case presently in many contexts in Brazil), this so that the students feel comfortable and at ease in their learning, can support one another and be supported, and to allow for a focus on *alfabetização*.

While in Cambé, we had occasion (upon the invitation of José Carani and local representatives of the municipality) to visit one elementary school where it would be feasible to adopt this kind of structure. The three classes (Grades 1, 2 and 3) were each composed of about 20 students and each classroom, while having its own autonomy, faced an inner courtyard where the children played together during recess time. Around the walls was posted the children's work, such as their recommendations for books they had been reading. Student

teachers were clearly identifiable by their white smocks as they assisted the classroom teacher. The first person we met upon entry to the school was the cook, who was preparing healthy snacks for the children. Curriculum and pedagogy were focused on literacy acquisition, evident in the writing on the blackboard, the activities in which students were engaged, and the posters and student work around the room. The teachers had also designed their own curriculum materials to help support student learning (materials that related to student experiences), they collaborated in developing curriculum across the three grades, and they also worked in close cooperation with a resource teacher, who focused instruction (in one-on-one afternoon teaching with a small group of no more than 10 students) on key areas identified in consultation with the classroom teachers. The school provided an example of the direction in which José Carani's proposal would move schools. One area that the school was working on was the greater involvement of parents, including as adult learners. They had offered a literacy program to adults in the past and hoped to do so again.



FIGURE 1. *Alphabetização in an elementary classroom in Cambé*

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The CAIS school would be grounded in social interaction with the community (Carani, 2004). Interaction with family would in fact be one of the school's main activities, especially with the families of the students. These activities might take different forms. There would be provision of literacy education of adults and socio-cultural activities, which would take place in the evenings at the school. Ongoing social support would be offered for the students' families. Orientation sessions (e.g., coaching) would be held regularly on how to interact with their children, including how to support their learning at home and help them with their homework. There would also be a strong presence

of the family in the school activities. The parents could do voluntary work at the school. That work would be officially recognized.

Meaningful family involvement in their children's education is a goal pursued by many schools in Canada as well, some along the lines of the CAIS proposal, such as the parenting and literacy centres springing up in schools in Ontario, although these focus primarily on helping parents prepare their young children for school.¹ The difference in José's proposal is the degree of family involvement in the daily organization of a primary school's learning activities. Family participation is a *main* goal of the school. The school is as much concerned with supporting the parents' literacy as it is with promoting that of the children. This is because there is a recognition that the two go hand in hand. A similar insight underlies the field of family literacy, which begins from a strength-based (rather than the more common deficit-based) perspective of seeing the family, home and community as integral to a child's learning, especially their literacy learning (Auerbach, 1989 ; Morrow, 1995 ; Wasik, 2012).

TEACHER FORMATION

In Brazil, the training of elementary teachers has remained largely in the domain of normal schools (Coutinho, 1992) or at least this was the case in Cambé. Certification of teachers occurs at the municipal level in Brazil. Young people who intend to be future teachers decide on their chosen vocation by as young as 15 years old, while they are still in high school. They then apply to normal school.



FIGURE 2. *Normal school of Cambé*

The term “normal school” derives originally from the French. In the Americas, the normal school responded to the growing need for qualified teachers and developed outside of the universities, which in the nineteenth century were not interested in becoming involved in teacher education. Developed in earnest in 1880, the Brazil normal school took its cue from the Massachusetts model (Coutinho, 1992). Normal school came to symbolize an initiation into the teaching profession based on learning to teach through observation and through being observed; its structure was based on observation of practice by “master teachers” (Storey, 2003). Normal schools were subsumed within the university system (faculties of education) in the UK, US and Canada as part of a post-war reconsideration of educational goals and ideals, this during the 1960s and 1970s (Henchey, 1990; Robbins, 1963) however, in Brazil, the normal school has persisted, being closely tied to the municipalities. Most students go first to normal school, then to university. Subject specialization is largely the province of the university.

What is needed, and comprises a key part of José Carani’s CAIS project, is to create a pathway for future teachers to specialize in *alfabetização*, for those who exhibit a vocation for this area. As part of this specialization, the future teachers would spend time in the schools as they presently do in the normal schools, but as part of their specialization, working in the schools morning and afternoon, they would follow *the same* elementary students, moving with them from one year to the next. Moreover, the teacher who is there in the morning to teach the children will notice and observe the children who have difficulty and in the afternoon, work with them more intensively while the others are completing their homework or are engaged in other activities, this with an assistant teacher. Important is that any difficulties that a student is encountering be addressed on the same day, with immediate feedback rather than learning being delayed. At the same time, the teacher in formation would be learning about the various stages of learning and development in early childhood.

An ancillary purpose of this specialization would be to give greater weight and credibility to the teaching of young children, while also recognizing that literacy learning is a demanding intellectual undertaking that requires a certain knowledge and classroom expertise. Teacher formation is part of a larger issue in Brazil. A key part of José Carani’s proposal is advocating for a teacher salary that is commensurate with the importance of the intellectual pedagogical work that they are doing with children. The salaries of public school teachers are currently very low, often not sufficient for daily living (Coutinho, 1992; World Bank, 2011). While teachers need to have a proper formation (i.e. specialization), what also follows from this, as José Carani pointed out, are good conditions for working so that the teacher has a sense of dignity and worth for the nature of the work he / she is doing. Good conditions for working (for teachers) are related to good conditions for learning (for the students and their families).

DIMINUIR A DISTANCIA

When we visited the normal school in Cambé, we saw (and heard) much evidence of the ideas and practices of Paulo Freire. Teaching is closely tied to democratic goals for popular and civic education (Coutinho, 1992).



TRANSLATION. It is necessary to reduce the distance between what is said and what is done, in such a way that at one point what you say is your practice).

FIGURE 3. Sign inside the entrance of the Normal School, Cambé

The underlying vision of José Carani's *escola família* is to reduce distances: between what we say we want for all children and what schools actually do or are able to do, between theory and practice, between funding allocations and educational outcomes, between the societal importance of teachers' work and their salaries, and perhaps most concretely, the distance between the school and the community, beginning with the geographical distance. Through close collaborations between family, school and community, CAIS (Centro de Alfabetização é Interação Social) aims to create a positive ambience for learning for all. José Carani's educational proposal responds to the socio-economic and literacy needs generated by the rapid transition from rural to a more urban society in Cambé. The three first years of literacy acquisition are determinant for the progress and the welfare of future citizens. What he has proposed is mainly a reorganization of the available support at the municipal level. The general will to improve the learning conditions is there and efforts are being made in that direction, in that vast pedagogical laboratory that is Brazil. However, we can all learn from José Carani's proposal for change, as its fundamental tenets could also easily find a home here.

NOTES

1 The Centres in Ontario “help prepare children for starting school and encourage families to be a part of their children’s early learning by: Helping children build essential literacy and numeracy skills through stories, music, reading and playing; Offering a book-lending library in different languages so parents can read to their children in their first language; Familiarizing children and families with school routines; Giving children and families the chance to spend time with other families; Linking families with appropriate community resources for special needs, health and other related services” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014)

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GEORGE CARANI's areas of research include popular education, sociocognitive processes (beliefs, attitudes, intentions) and positive psychology (hope). His doctorate (2014; *A Psychosocial Approach to HIV/AIDS Pill-Taking Behavior: A Qualitative Study*) examined how people in dire socio-economic conditions living with HIV/AIDS learned how to achieve medical adherence despite major barriers.

JOSÉ CARANI is actively involved in advocating for access and quality in education, from being a teacher, a director of secondary school as well as of Normal School (teacher formation) in Cambé. He is a retired professor from the Department of Exact Sciences, State University of Londrina, Brazil, where he taught for over 30 years.

TERESA STRONG-WILSON is committed to participatory forms of research with teachers and students. She is especially interested in the place and use of stories in literacy education and early childhood. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University.

GEORGE CARANI effectue des recherches dans les domaines de l'éducation populaire, des processus sociocognitifs (croyances, attitudes, intentions) et de la psychologie positive (espoir). Sa thèse de doctorat (2014; *A Psychosocial Approach to HIV/AIDS Pill-Taking Behavior: A Qualitative Study*) explore la manière dont les personnes atteintes du VIH/SIDA et vivant dans des conditions socioéconomiques difficiles apprennent à maintenir une adhérence médicale constante, malgré des obstacles importants.

JOSÉ CARANI est un ardent défenseur d'un meilleur accès à l'éducation et d'une éducation de qualité que ce soit à titre d'enseignant ou comme directeur d'une école secondaire et d'une École normale (école consacrée à la formation des maîtres) à Cambé. Avant de prendre sa retraite comme professeur, il a enseigné plus de 30 ans au département des sciences exactes de l'Université d'état de Londrina, située au Brésil.

TERESA STRONG-WILSON se consacre à des projets de recherche participative auprès d'enseignants et d'étudiants. Elle s'intéresse particulièrement à l'importance accordée aux histoires et à leur utilisation dans le processus d'alphabétisation et la petite enfance. Elle est professeure agrégée au département d'études intégrées en sciences de l'éducation à l'Université McGill.