

MY SCHOOL IN SANTO AMARO

When I came here to teach there were eight hundred inhabitants; now there are only four hundred and no young people. Back then it was unthinkable to be a nursery teacher. The course was not open to men. I insisted and insisted and insisted, until they accepted me, only because they desperately needed more nursery teachers...

My certificate actually said: António Ramos Santos completed the women's nursery nursing course on such and such a date in 1975.

It's kind of funny. My friends thought I was crazy.

I'm very proud to say that I was part of the first pre-school activity projects in the Calçada da Ajuda. Yes, I wasn't from here and, at the time, coming to the deepest Alentejo to teach was a real wrench that only attracted passionate people like me. But it was also a unique place for putting a methodology into practice that in Lisbon at that time, even with the openness and freedom of those days, they were unable to provide for their students. Here, you really learned in a community.

I've always loved my profession. I've always loved the Alentejo. And now that I've retired, I'm not trading this place for anywhere else. I've put down roots here, I've spent my best times here, my longest friendships are here. I remember well my first days at school. I used to live right here, in the square, two minutes from the school, in a small room rented from a widow with no children. I used to read her the newspaper every morning before I left. In the evening, she would always leave me a little dish on the kitchen table with some rice and slices of veal, or a chicken breast, and I always apologised the next day for my lack of appetite.

Teaching is like fishing with a rod, you get one delicacy at a time. Every kid is a paradise and a unique and rare puzzle. That's why I always refused to have regular parents meetings at school. I've always preferred to meet parents one by one outside school, away from where I was the authority figure. How can you find out more about the children you are teaching if you only know them when they are with

you and under your authority?

I then went to their parents and asked them one by one what they thought was most essential for the development of their sons and daughters. I asked them what their biggest anxieties and fears were, about the strongest or the most creative aspects of each of their children, about their talents and their weaknesses. Little by little I have put together a puzzle with all of their requests, all of their wishes, and also all of their concerns.

And it was always like that. Here, all we had to do was ask the parents for help and we could set up a weaving class at school, we could spend a day picking chickpeas or tomatoes; we even had an archaeology workshop! Where would you ever be able to give kids those kinds of opportunities in the centre of Lisbon, where parents were juggling three jobs, all hours away from home? Here in the Alentejo we cooperated with each other. Here in the Alentejo, we would put into practice the democratic revolution that they had promised us. We cooperated; that is, we worked with each other, we made decisions together, parents, children, teachers, guardians and employees. But also the church, the lady from the cafe opposite, Father Zé who organised the Blessing of the Cattle every year and asked for our help in decorating the carts. We would pick the colours with the kids, we would plan the project with the help of the parents, we would prepare the materials for the paintings and for the decorations, and all of this was part of the lessons.

There are so many ways to fill a syllabus. For example, in the school we had three sheep and everybody in the school was responsible for their health and food.

We even had a pet lamb; you know we're in the Lamb Capital of Portugal, don't you?

And you know how we fed that lamb? With the milk from the cows that had mastitis.

The milk was not fit for human consumption, but it was perfect for feeding our lamb, and one of the fathers, when he found out a cow was sick, he would let the school

know and bring in the milk. And that's how connections were made, you understand?

With the parents, with the village... For example, it was easy to feed the sheep and lamb during the week - we even had chickens - but at the weekends, the key to the

school was passed around among the parents of each class, and one parent was usually allotted one weekend each at school. This would be impossible today; you'd have to fill out so many forms and pay so many employees to work overtime, just to open the door, that you'd have to give up on the lamb.

We, the nursery nurses, were serious practitioners of democracy. Nothing like this representative thing that they do now that's only useful for manipulating people. We were the example of a participatory democracy.

Even today, when I am told about responsibility and citizenship, I always say that this is not something that you teach for an hour and a half in a classroom, responsibility and citizenship are something you do! Cooperating is working with others, and that is what we do at school every day: we work with each other!

Today school is an ambivalent place; a superstructure that has decided to be located in a specific place but acts from the outside in, where the teaching content is disconnected from the daily realities of these children's families.

At that time it was different! I remember perfectly well a class where we all taught them how to design a house! Yes, I remember it like it was yesterday! We drew the dimensions of a house on the floor with chalk, and then we measured everything with string really carefully so that everyone would understand how to build a house, how you plan it before you build it.

We even made cement. We wrote a little letter to the parents to bring wellington boots one weekend and help put up the walls of the school. I must have spent so many afternoons in the countryside with the kids, threading flowers to make the garlands that decorated the cross and the chapel for the 3rd May festivities. They used to repaint Jesus' cradle every year. That meant a lot to everyone: to the village, to the parents and to the kids!

There are many ways to teach reading and writing. Any afternoon out in the fields, maths could sneak up on you and transform you. But make no mistake! I am not and have never been an activities organiser. I'm a nursery teacher and proud of it, and the kids didn't play up with me!

Nursery teachers were, in fact, the real cultural influencers in the most remote villages in those days. Now that relations in the community have become institutionalised, we are losing this connection and allowing power to reassert itself in its most extreme form, driving parents away from school and curricula from their subjects.

Participatory democracy is much more important!

You know, one of the most beautiful projects I did in my fifty years of service was there in the 1980s, some little string books we did with stories about the village grandparents. With the increase in compulsory schooling, families with small children began to move to Sousel, or else, and there were many cases like this, the children would spend the whole day away, arrive home very late, and would stop socialising with their grandparents and parents. Do you see the paradox?

Compulsory schooling increased and education ended up alienating the different generations. We went round and round in circles until we came up with an idea: what if we made a grandparents' songbook? A book where we tell the stories of all those who can't write, but have very old memories that will be lost forever if we don't record them. It was a beautiful year. I filled several notebooks myself with stories that nobody would know about today if they had not been written down at the time. Look, this is how I found out that the only radio in the village was at the school. It always had a glass of water on top. Do you know why? Because of the PIDE (secret police) era, before the Revolution. PIDE would go down the street and want to know what radio station was playing in the school, Radio Freedom or National Radio, but if we put a glass of water on top of the set, we would create enough interference to make it impossible to understand what frequency it was tuned to. Meanwhile the Revolution came and the glass stayed there. On top of the radio. And every day someone changes the water. This was one of the many stories we heard from the grandmothers.

I still have a couple of copies at home.

But today everything is different. Today we are living with a permanent backlash!

Life here is hard, you know? You have no idea what life was like here forty years ago. Now it's still hard, but we always have the feeling that the rest of the country is closer. But you can't say that it's easier to learn now. At the time I decided to come here to be a nursery teacher, I stress again, a female nursery teacher and not a male nursery teacher, despite this beautiful moustache that I never cut, it wasn't the sort of life for just anyone. Ah! what I wouldn't give to go back in time. Those were the best years of the Revolution.

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