Coping with COVID: The Experiences of Students from a Cooperative Learning School in

Rural Brazil During the Covid -19 Pandemic

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Covid has changed our lives dramatically in many ways. For school-age adolescents, it meant staying home and away from school activities and their friends. Isolation brought frustration and worsened many problems such as depression, domestic violence, and teen pregnancy. Low-income students have been affected exponentially, bringing to light problems such as the digital divide, unemployment, and food insecurity. In Latin America, these problems were described in the UNICEF Education on Hold Report (2020). According to the report, for 18 out of 36 Latin American and Caribbean countries and territories, the doors to classrooms remained shut until November 2020; 3.1 million students are at risk of dropping out of school, and 137 million students have missed out on an average of 174 days of learning (world average is 40 days) and are at risk of losing an entire school year (UNICEF, 2020). Besides the problems most countries experienced, such as lack of adequate online technology for the less privileged and lack of teacher training on online learning, Latin America has these problems at a disproportionate level with ½ of the public-school students lacking internet access. In Honduras, for example, only 20 % of the household have internet access. The report states that: "Overall, in Latin American and Caribbean countries, 21 percent of children from the poorest households are not receiving education of any kind compared to 14 percent from the richest households" (p.10).

Much research has been done on the effects of the pandemic, but there are few, if any, studies about how schools are dealing with the situation or how students are coping during these times of stress. Because cooperative learning has a strong link with the acquisition of social and emotional competencies, this pilot study explores how rural low-income high school students in

cooperative learning school in Latin America are coping with these stressful problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This pilot study will aim to bring light to these questions:

1 - What are the specific issues students are experimenting with during the pandemic?

2 – How, if at all, has cooperative learning methodology been a catalyst for minimizing these issues?

This single case pilot study takes a phenomenological approach using the voice of a senior student from a cooperative learning school to help shed light on the feelings of other students who have experienced these two phenomena: experience the Covid pandemic and be a student in a low-income rural cooperative learning school in Latin America. A complete study with more participants is of extreme importance because we can uncover the common essence and the link between these two phenomena. The preliminary findings of the pilot study are very promising, and I believe that a full investigation will reveal exciting data about the advantages of the cooperative learning method in improving students' social and emotional competencies and helping them overcome stressful situations. Further implications in public policy which influence teacher training may be of extreme significance for advancing education quality in Latin America.

Literature Review

The literature review will be threefold: first, I will cover how the pandemic has unfolded in Brazil and its overall psychological effects on the Brazilian population, especially the less economically privileged. Second, I will review research that demonstrates how some school systems in different parts of Brazil have answered the pandemic and its possible future effects on students' learning. Then I will dive into what literature says about cooperative learning and its links with social-emotional competencies.

The Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil

The Covid-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented event that has affected the lives of most people all over the world. From the beginning of March 2020, families have had to isolate themselves in their homes, students had to stop going to school in person, and most hospitals have come to the brink trying to save the lives of so many people at the same time. Today, according to the Johns Hopkins Research Center (2021), the virus has taken more than 3.3 million lives, with a total of approximately 160 million registered cases. Health systems in many countries had to find creative ways to adapt to the situation while the scientific community, together or in isolation, have been in a non-stoppable frenzy to curtail the effects of this voraciously contagious virus by doing research.

Brazil has not been different. The country has recorded 15 million cases of the virus and about 428 thousand deaths by May 13, 2021 (Johns Hopkins Research Center, 2021). Albeit the rapid actions of some Brazilian states to discontinue the spread of the disease and the advent of vaccination, the federal uncoordinated right-wing government idle situation, coupled with the lack of infrastructure and social-economic problems, the pandemic has affected the Brazilian population in unprecedented ways bringing not only physical but also acute psychological distress (Goularte et al., 2021). The population is divided in dealing with this crisis, but the Brazilian scientific community has answered the call in a diligent way (Rosa et al., 2021).

Between 2004 and 2014, vast crucial social, educational, and technological measures took place under the leadership of left-wing presidencies of Dilma Rousseff and her predecessor Lula da Silva. Brazil's government invested heavily in research by restructuring and expanding the university system and Brazil's research centers. The injection of funds improved innovation and built the foundation for the surge in research during the Covid-19 pandemic (Rosa et al.,

2021). Even though the new current right-wing federal government has not supported in full all the research done since the start of the pandemic, federal universities and federal research centers have used all the support they can, including volunteers, to remain steady in the pursuit for ways to understand the pandemic in Brazil and create procedures to protect and save Brazilian lives. During this period, there was a surge of research proposals with 789 implemented projects. Most of them had the goal to create cheaper and adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), medical devices, diagnostic tests, vaccines, and medicines (Rosa et al., 2021).

Most of the research focused on the medical field; however, the psychological, social, and educational effects of Covid-19 in the Brazilian population were also studied. A nationwide study conducted between May 2020 and June 2020, with 12,196 people, revealed a high prevalence of moderate and severe levels of psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, and stress, due to the pandemic. Political insecurity problems were also exacerbated during the pandemic. The Brazilian president avoided taking more pressing measures towards combating the disease, leading to confusion and causing the increase of cases all over Brazil (Campos et al., 2020).

According to the vast body of research, the Brazilian population has been severely impacted by the pandemic, and problems have been exacerbated by pre-existing social, economic, infrastructural, and political issues (Machado et al., 2020).

Public Education in Brazil During the Pandemic

Brazil has a compulsory free public education system for children 4 to 17 years of age. Public education is decentralized. The federal government is in charge of public universities; the 26 states are in charge of high schools, and the 5,570 municipalities are in charge of pre-k to 8th grade. The public system encompasses 80.9% of all schools in the country and serves all low-

income students, and middle-income and high-income students attend private schools, according to the Brazilian Ministry of Education (2021). The education network encompasses almost 39 million pre-k to 12-grade students and more than 2 million university students (MEC - Brazilian Ministry of Education, 2018). Even though the federal government is responsible for only a small part of the education funds transferred to the states and municipalities, it is responsible for monitoring, regulating, coordinating, and evaluating the whole system.

On March 17, 2020, the federal government shut down schools following what other countries had been doing. Private schools quickly followed the National Board of Education guidelines published in April 2020 to start distance learning. However, because of the denial of the far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, about the severity of the virus, thus choosing not to take charge in coordinating the efforts to organize the public educational system, most public schools were closed for almost five months from March 17 to the beginning of August 2020 (Moraes et at., 2021). States and municipalities were left to decide what to do in terms of every aspect of education. From student curriculum to teacher training, Brazilian school administrators were caught in the middle of a system that had to deal with a population of which 88.2% are low income, and 20% do not have a computer at home (INEP, 2019). There is also a considerable resource discrepancy within Brazil's states, with the northeast and northern states, the least economically developed, holding the least educational resources (Moraes et al., 2021).

Daily meals were a priority to some schools. Governments kept feeding the students through supermarket vouchers or distribution of food baskets. Moraes et al. (2021) state that only about 18% of municipal schools were sending digital materials to students via cellular phones (mainly through Whatsapp). Only about 7.45% recorded classes and sent them to students during these four months of complete closures. For the students who did not have internet connectivity,

6.4% of these schools provided printed material at school, or teachers delivered it at students' homes. However, only 10% of the schools were collecting data on students' learning. On the high school level, the situation was described as uncoordinated, with only 22% of the states using some sort of virtual learning such as radio, television, and virtual classes (Moraes et al., 2020).

Very few studies have been done about how schools have addressed learning. A case study in a k-12 public school in Brazil's south region shows how the school has communicated with its students. The platform used was the school website, and it initiated the week after the school shut down, on March 23, 2020 (Nedel Oliveira, 2020). The study did not state the school demographics, size, or social-economic status of the students. Nothing is mentioned about how students and families were feeling towards the new way of learning and communicating. The author considered the implementation a success. However, no reason was given for such success. Another example of how a school has planned for virtual learning comes from Brazil's northeast (region of our pilot study) from a low-income state called Piaui. Martins et al. (2020) analyzed the plans of an elementary school in a city of 50 thousand people called Floriano. All students come from low-income families who were either from an urban area or a rural area in the city's surroundings. Because of the lack of computers and internet in the municipality's rural areas, the school used different methods to deliver instruction. Some teachers would even travel to students' homes to deliver the study package (Martins et al. 2020). Albeit the tremendous effort done by the teachers and administrators, low socioeconomic families have been hit much harder, and many students have lost almost a year of instruction. The results of these efforts in terms of educational gains or losses could not be measured based solely on these descriptive studies because students or teachers were part of this inquiry.

There were many essential research studies during the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil. However, none of them discussed the school methodology's role in helping minimize student psychological problems during the pandemic. Learning gains are necessary at all times, but more important than learning is our youth's mental health. This qualitative study will focus on the students' side of the story, their voices, their feelings of how they experience the pandemic, and how was the school's role in minimizing their struggles due to social distancing caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Cooperative Learning

Much research has been done on Cooperative Learning (CL) effectiveness in increasing academic outcomes and building students' social and emotional competencies. David and Roger Johnson have written and co-written more than 500 articles on the subject since the 1960s. Cooperative learning uses small groups, from 2-4 students, to accomplish individual and shared goals. But, not all groups are the same. Cooperative learning groups are long-term, heterogenous, provide one another support, encouragement to achieve their common academic goals (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Cooperative groups follow these five essential elements according to the Johnson brothers: 1 – positive interdependence, which is the bond that they create and the understanding that we are all in this together; 2 – Individual accountability, which is the responsibility of each student to do their best for the good of themselves and the group; 3 – Face-to-face interaction, which is the ability to promote each other's learning by oral discussion of concepts and ideas, and teaching each other their section of the lesson; 4 – Social skills, which include the purposefully learning of trust-building, communication skills and conflict management together with the subjects; and 5- Group processing, which is the ability to identify, define and solve problems, ask questions and keep the cooperation going (Johnson & Johnson,

1999, 2014). Hence, one cannot place students together and expect them to cooperate and effectively take full advantage of the group work. Therefore, students need to learn how to cooperate.

An extensive literature review study reveals that most studies on the effectiveness of cooperative learning in academic achievement were inconclusive. However, the study concludes that "most teachers do not implement the most basic components of cooperative learning" (Sutherland et al., p.235) and that levels of cooperative behavior should be accessed before implementation.

Cooperative Learning and Social and Emotional Learning go hand-in-hand

Cooperative Learning is often perceived solely as a strategy to improve academic skills, hindering students' potential to learn other essential skills such as social and emotional skills. However, a study conducted in the mid-Hudson area of New York and Boston asserts that "we need not sell cooperative learning short" (Schniedewind & Davidson, 2000, p.24). They found that cooperative groups that are heterogenous in academic levels, race, culture, and social-economic status promote learning different skills and contribute to a shared goal.

Two of the primary positive outcomes of cooperative education are the personal relationships it helps create through positive social interdependence and the improvement of students' social and emotional competencies. Based on over 180 studies that have been conducted since 1940, cooperative learning promotes the "development of caring and committed relationships for every student" and "help students establish and maintain friendships with peers" (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, p.72) because social skills are taught and practiced every day by students.

After the Sandy Hook Elementary school in Connecticut and Stoneman Douglas High school in Florida mass shootings that killed 45 students and staff, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has been the focus of many school counties. For example, Broward County Public School, which Stoneman Douglas High school is part of, initiated many programs for students, staff, and families to help them understand and overcome their struggles and improve their emotional health (Broward County Public Schools, 2021). Unquestionably, these training and resources are essential after such traumatic events. However, students and staff are often exposed to these implementations very sporadically and may utilize them as identifiers of mental problems in class or as a restorative approach to discipline (Haymovitz et al.,2017; Trach et al., 2018). In a study about implementing a SEL program in a k-12 community, the results mainly aimed at tackling behavior problems and behavior interventions. They explained that "students who do not respond to a particular module receive progressive programming until symptoms abate" (Haymovitz et al., 2017, p.46). As the intervention modules subside, SEL learning also tends to be forgotten.

Cooperative Learning needs to come into play to keep SEL practice alive every day. An extensive literature review that addresses SEL in groups asserts that the use of CL should be implemented as a way to "provide opportunities for positive interactions and to experience solving social conflicts peacefully, both of which are critical aspects of SEL" (Trach et al. 2018, p.15). Social and Emotional Learning is part of the five essential elements of cooperative learning and a way to keep practicing social and emotional skills every day.

Even though there is robust literature on the link between cooperative learning and the development of social and emotional skills inside the classroom and school, no study relates to using and maintaining these skills in an online setting during a highly stressful time as the Covid-

19 pandemic. This study seeks to understand if cooperative learning may have influenced students in solving their struggles during the Covid-19 pandemic. Did the relationships they forge at school before the pandemic carry out into the new online environment? How do they feel about not being with their friends? Did CL help them overcome some of their struggles? These are some of the questions I hope to unveil.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework will inform this study based on the Social Interdependence Theory, developed by Morton Deutsch (1949), and the Social-Emotional Framework from The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). This methodology will guide this study in the search for answers concerning the link between cooperative education and its role in fostering positive social interdependence and social-emotional learning (SEL) and if it has helped students from a low-income rural school in Latin America to cope with the psychological stresses caused by the Covi-19 pandemic in a new online environment.

Social Interdependence Theory

In 1949, after World War II, Morton Deutsch was preoccupied with the race for nuclear armament empowerment between the United States and Russia and decided to study the results of social interdependence at MIT. Deutsch believed that nations would only survive if they worked together in a positive interdependence, thus coming to positive outcomes. This theory was the genesis of the cooperative and competitive approaches to group work (Deutsch, 1991). Deutsch founded The Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Columbia University in 1986 and is considered the father of conflict resolution (International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, 2021). His theory asserts that group cooperation and competition depend on goal interdependence. If the group goal has a

negative interdependence, meaning if one person's (or country's) success correlates with another's failure creating a win-lose situation, the relationship is competitive. This situation allows for obstructed communication, suspicion, and domination. On the other hand, if the goal interdependence is positive, meaning, if the group success means individual success and failure leads to group failure, creating a win-win orientation, the relationship is cooperative. In addition, it yields positive characteristics such as effective communication, friendships, and the willingness to boost other's power (Deutsch, 1949). Thus, cooperative processes are constructive and positive, and competitive processes are destructive (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 2005). The Social Interdependence Theory was the base theory for the cooperative learning framework developed by David and Roger Johnson in the 1980s at the University of Minnesota. It was adopted and enhanced by the school participating in this study since its opening in 2011. However, the Social Interdependence Theory does not address the acquisition of other social and emotional skills. So, the inclusion of the Social-Emotional Framework from The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is needed to create a complete conceptual framework to guide this study.

The Social and Emotional Framework

Social and emotional frameworks should provide systematic classroom methodology to promote children's capacity to recognize and manage their emotions, appreciate others' feelings and perspectives, and build and maintain healthy relationships (Payton et al., 2000). The Social-Emotional Framework that will guide us through this study will be the Social-Emotional Framework from The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL is a non-profit international organization that was founded in 1994. It interacts with many countries, including Brazil, where this study is taking place, through the Instituto para

Aprendizagem Social e Emotional (IASEA). In the United States, out of the 14 states that incorporated social-emotional learning (SEL) in their educational system, 11 follow the CASEL framework (Dusenbury et al., 2019). Thus, even though the school in our study does not formally incorporate the CASEL framework, the students may have incorporated these principles naturally according to the cooperative learning principles and prior research as cited above in the literature review.

The CASEL's SEL framework retrieved from their website explains its five core competencies:1 – Self-awareness, which is the capacity to perceive one's feelings and how they influence behavior across context; 2 – Self-management, which is the ability to manage one's emotion and achieve goals; 3 – Social Awareness, which is the ability to perceive other's perspectives and empathize with them; 4 – Relationship Skills, which is the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships; and 5 – Responsible Decision Making, which is the ability to make caring and personal and social constructive choices (CASEL, 2021). Unfortunately, implementation is often faulty because of its short duration and not included as a routine practice (Payton et al., 2000). CASEL advises cooperative learning practices as a way to promote effective SEL. To summarize, SEL is a way to build intrapersonal and interpersonal skills that will sustain throughout the students' lives (Domitrovich et al., 2017).

Methodology and Methods

My main goal as a researcher is to amplify the voices of the underserved in the rural areas of the northeast of Brazil. My focus in this paper is to inquire if cooperative learning has contributed to lessening the damaging social and emotional effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in a new online environment. I believe that it is through education that humans can free themselves of their shackles and the ones imposed on them.

Phenomenology is the methodology applied in this study because it searches for the individual and collective essence caused by a phenomenon or phenomena. In this pilot study, the participant experienced two phenomena: 1 - the Covid-19 pandemic and 2 - the experience of being a student in a cooperative learning high school. This methodology has its genesis in the writings of mathematician Edmund Husserl at the end of the 19th century and then expanded with van Manen and Moustakas (Dowling, 2007). Scientists decided to return to a more philosophical research realm instead of pure empirical views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology interprets the text of small groups that can vary from 3 to 15 people and searches for what has been lived and how it has been lived, trying to find a common essence for the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Two concepts in research have emerged from phenomenology. First is the idea of epoche, which is to reduce the phenomenon experienced by the participant to its natural state without any interpretation by the researcher (Bevan, 2014). Second is the idea of bracketing, which is when the researcher takes a pause and explains his/her interpretation of the participants' experience based on their own bias and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative research, the relationship between research and researcher tends to be blurred. Values, beliefs, and feelings are intertwined and may distort the whole process of the study. In phenomenology, the axiological aspect of research is clear. The researcher's feelings and values become part of the narrative, including his/her interpretation and those of participants. The researcher is engaged in transparently interpreting the text by bracketing to elucidate his understanding. It leaves no room for assumptions; everything is clear, even the inevitable possibility of bias.

Generalization is usually part of the research process. Nevertheless, phenomenology does not search for generalizations; the ontological aspect is that there are multiple realities; the nature

of reality is individual and malleable. "The reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.122). The ever-changing individual construction of the truth is unique, and it is inappropriate to generalize because it encompasses distinctive histories and feelings of fear, respect, love, security, joy that, in turn, have their intensity and importance. Phenomenology offers this individual aspect of reality. It will uncover the essence of what individual participants have been through during the Covid-19 pandemic and may reveal a common essence based on these phenomena after the complete research is conducted.

I feel things deeply, and I aim to find the deep meaning of my participants' words and feelings. I want to be intentional, personal, and involved in this beautiful dialogue of discovering the essence of these phenomena. I believe that phenomenological inquiry suits well to unveil the lived experiences of these students as cooperative learners during the e Covid-19 pandemic.

As part of the complete research project, I will conduct ten semi-structured, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews in Portuguese, the participants' native language, using the Zoom platform. Under the phenomenological interview methodology lens, I will be searching for the essence of the phenomena: the Covid-19 pandemic and the experience of being a student in a cooperative learning high school. Interviews will be semi-structured with a few open-ended questions to give the participants more freedom to express themselves. According to Seidman (2006), phenomenological interviews follow three stages: 1 – the search for context, 2 – the description of the phenomenon, and 3 – the reflection on the meaning of the phenomenon. I will practice what phenomenologists call "epoche," which tries to eliminate bias and ask questions about basic concepts avoiding presuppositions. This approach will create other supporting descriptive questions as the interviews evolve (Bevan, 2014). The goal is to obtain as many

details as possible about context, the phenomena, and the feelings behind the phenomena to find the individual essence and a collective essence of the phenomena. I intend to do at least one interview with each participant but leave room for further clarifications, if necessary.

Besides the interviews, I will collect essays written by the ten students about the pandemic as an assignment from their Portuguese teacher during the pandemic. For a more thick description and better triangulation, I will also analyze their social media posts on Instagram from March 2020 to December 2020.

For this pilot study, I have conducted one semi-structured, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews in Portuguese using the Zoom platform in March 2021.

Positionality

I am a Brazilian woman, 50 years old and I have been living in the USA since 2001. I am a proud mother of a 19-year-old boy who is now in college. I consider myself a positive, enthusiastic person who loves people and their stories. I am deeply concerned and puzzled about issues that have affected the Brazilian population, like poverty and political corruption, and I am on a mission to understand those issues.

I was born in the northeast of Brazil, in the state called Ceara (the focus of this study), one of Brazil's poorest states (ranking 23 out of 26 states by GDP). Even though Ceara is known for its beautiful beaches, welcoming people, rich culture, great food, and exuberant religious festivals, it still has one of Brazil's most significant economic and social inequalities. In one corner, we can see apartment buildings that look like ivory tower castles with armed security; on the other, we see slums with barefoot children running around open sewages unsupervised. I lived in these ivory towers. I was born and raised so close to the most vulnerable people of the state of Ceara, yet, at the same time, so distant. Through formal, non-formal, and informal

education, the discourse I heard every day was a very colonizing one. I was taught that the poor were unfortunate people who needed help, who were hungry, who were suffering, who were unskilled, ignorant, and violent with nothing worthwhile to offer society. That was my truth about them, the one story that was repeated to me so many times. Even though poverty seemed to me like an ordinary and natural occurrence of life, I always had the urge to help the poor and change their degrading circumstances. However, I never asked the critical question: Why? What is the reason for so much inequality? My research goes deep into the lives of the poor and rural people of my state to uncover a socially constructed reality of their lives the way they see it.

These 20 years living in the US have introduced me to different stories of my people in Brazil. The yearly trips to Brazil (sometimes twice a year), conversations with friends and family, long car rides on terrible roads to meet unique people in my state of Ceara have taught me that many great people do enormous good. I have witnessed the creativity and ingenuity of the (so-called) poor who once I thought could not contribute in any way. I understood that there are so many stories in the world that judging from only one point of view is unfair. The less privileged can help us appreciate how to live more frugally, closer to nature, family, and the community. They found ways out of poverty through cooperative learning and other movements and brought their whole community with them. These are also their stories. Ngozi Adichie (2013) explains how anyone can be trapped in believing and generalizing a single story you hear from the media, from books, from your parents and friends. All those single stories become the only true story about a people, a country, a race! I was given the gift to understand that there are so many different stories, and they all have to be respected and cherished.

Today I have many questions, and I want answers. I am an educator by heart, and I believe that it is through quality education that poverty can be eradicated. We are social beings,

and it is through empathy and cooperation, we can progress to a more sustainable and equitable world. My hopes and dreams to improve Brazil's education have grown exponentially, especially because now, more than ever, I believe in the power of the human mind, creativity, and love. Through the discord we see every day in the news, it all may seem illogic, but all this madness's counteraction is uniquely grand. People are getting together to solve problems, think together, understand and try new things, try different and more creative ways to live better lives in every corner of our globe. Ceara, especially in rural areas, albeit its poverty levels (or maybe because of them), is a place of creativity and alternatives in education. It is a place where cooperative education and solidarity have flourished and brought new hopes for the neediest. I long to understand these alternatives ways of learning and how they have shaped and improved rural communities, especially now during the Covid-19 global pandemic.

Cooperative education has been one of the most striking examples of education alternatives in this region. It has opened the horizons of so many low-income families, giving them a new path out of poverty. The chance to start my deep understanding of these topics is fascinating to me, especially now with the Covid-19 pandemic. I consider myself an insider and outsider researcher in the eyes of my participants. My position as an insider researcher comes from the fact that I was born in Ceara, I speak the language, know the culture, and am an educator. But many aspects of who I am make me an outsider researcher. For example, I am from the capital of the state, not the rural areas; I moved to the USA in 2001, and much as happened during this time; I was brought up with a Western hegemonic, colonizing discourse that makes me bias on my views about the poor and the disfranchised. I am aware of these views, and I will try my best to practice epoche and express my feelings through bracketing. As a constructivist, I believe that reality is socially constructed and contextual, may change

throughout the study, and will depend on whose viewpoint you are requesting. I am excited to unveil these contexts and realities through the eyes of the participants. I am curious to explore how these alternative education methods, especially cooperative learning and solidarity education, as it is practiced in this region, have impacted students' lives during these stressful times. I believe that once more, we will understand that the oppressed have used their creativity and innovation to better their lives in a moment of profound crisis because they have proven that overcoming obstacles is what they know how to do best.

Sample & Data Collection Procedure

To deeper understand the Covid-19 pandemic experiences and how cooperative learning has helped minimize these social and emotional aspects, than I could be able to understand on my own; I will recruit ten students from a cooperative learning and solidarity education school in the northeast of Brazil. I chose this site because in March 2020, I started a relationship of partnership with this school. Furthermore, it is the only school that uses the cooperative learning approach as a methodology in the state of Ceara. The goal of the study is not only to understand the effects caused by the Covid-19 pandemic but also how cooperative learning has helped in any way to minimize these effects. All of the students will be seniors in this high school during the pandemic. A consent form will be sent home for the parents to sign for students who are 17 years old or younger.

For this pilot study, I recruited one student whose pseudo name is MG. She has been gracious enough to share personal stories of her journey through the pandemic and how the school methodology has affected how she overcame some of the pandemic's social and emotional aspects, such as loneliness, helplessness, vulnerability, and fear. She has been my mentee for the past four months, and she is posing as my gatekeeper for further snowballing

recruitment. She was excited when I asked to interview her, and she promptly offered to recruit

other students to be interviewed for the complete research study. Her mother signed a consent

form because she is 17 years old. We exchanged emails about days and times that were more

appropriate for her, and subsequently, I sent her the individual Zoom link.

The semi-structured, one-on-one, face-to-face interview was conducted in March 2021.

She was at home in Brazil, and I was in the United States. She was very relaxed and willing to

share her experiences. The interview took approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in her

native language, Portuguese. I made sure she was comfortable with the interview procedure and

understood the goals of the interview. In phenomenology, the interviewer needs to use open-

ended questions and try their hardest not to lead the conversation. Table 1 shows the interview

questions based on the goals of phenomenology first to find the context, then listen to the

description of the phenomena and finally reflect on the phenomena.

Table 1

Question for context:	• Tell me how school life was six months before the pandemic
Question for the description of the phenomena:	• What are the specific social and emotional issues you are experiencing during the pandemic in and out of school?
Questions for the reflection of the phenomena:	• How did you feel about these issues? • What has been the impact of cooperative learning? • What could be improved at school to help you minimize the social and emotional stress caused by the pandemic?

There were many probe questions for clarification of meaning. In the end, I thank her for her time and ask her to contact her in the future for more clarifications and to conduct member checks aiming to improve trustworthiness.

For the complete research study, I will use the same interview procedure. However, for a think description and triangulation, besides interviews, I will also collect essays written by the ten students about the pandemic as an assignment in their Portuguese class and analyze their social media posts on Instagram from March 2020 to December 2020. Moreover, I will add peer checks by meeting the principal and one teacher from the school to improve trustworthiness during the data analysis stage of the research.

Proposed Data Analysis

For most efficacy on data analysis, after translating the interviews, essays, and Instagram posts from Portuguese into English, I will highlight significant statements, sentences, and quotes that explain how the participants experienced the phenomena. I will then proceed to a systematic interpretation of what participants experience, called textural description, and how they experience the phenomena, also called structural description (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These interpretations are then separated into categories and then into themes searching for the essence of the individual experiences and then the essence of the phenomena.

Member checks and peer checks will be performed. Peer checks will include the director of the school and one teacher from the school. The phenomenology methodology seeks the individual's perceptions and meaning of a phenomenon or experience (essence), what has been lived, and how it has been lived, trying to find a common essence for the phenomenon. It does not seek generalizations; the goal is to show how some individuals experienced the phenomena with the intent to shed light on other people's experiences without generalization.

Preliminary Findings

The preliminary findings of this pilot study initiated the process to answer these two research questions:

1 - What are the specific issues students are experimenting with during the pandemic?

2 – How, if at all, has cooperative learning methodology been a catalyst for minimizing these issues?

The results are promising and should be taken into significant consideration in the decision to move forward in the efforts to initiate a complete research project. What MG said was very poignant. By giving voice to her experience, I draw upon the notion of listening in a manner that is deeply contextual – listening for social, cultural, and community context of her life concerning two phenomena, the Covid-19 pandemic and being a student in a cooperative learning school.

Based on these research questions, I decided to separate MG's interview into two categories: 1 – *Covid Stress* and 2 – *Students Related School Experience During Covid*. Then I started looking for themes according to those two categories.

The first theme that emerged based on the first category, *Covid Stress*, was *Frustration*. MG remarks were:

> *Things started to get worse; I started to worry and became anxious. There were a lot of uncertainties. My family did not know what would happen. The school did not know when classes would come back. Fear and anxiety prevailed. I stayed home from March until August. I did not even go to the sidewalk.*

In this passage, MG revealed a variety of events and feelings that were important during the pandemic, including those with family and with the school. In addition, a repetition of the phrases such as: <u>did not know</u>, indicates ways in which MG expressed her feelings of frustration.

In the same category, a second theme, *Fear,* has emerged in relation to *Covid Stress*. MG

expressed how she felt about being at home. She said:

> *In the beginning, it was like a vacation at home. But everything stopped. My sister
> and my father spent all the time at home with my mom and me. Even though we have a
> good relationship, we had conflicts because we were together all the time. It was kind of
> hard also because of the financial side. We did not know how we were going to pay the
> bills in the future.*

The passage above indicates her family's decision to stay home because of the fear of

being sick. They also experience financial insecurity, which brought the fear of not being able to

pay for the essential things. These two themes offer us context to what MG was living and

feeling during the pandemic.

Regarding the second category, now related to the *Students School Related Experience*

During Covid category, other two themes have emerged. The first theme in the category is

Empathy.

> *It (the pandemic) got everyone by surprise. We all **worry** on different levels, but we all
> **worried**. There was a constant concern from the teachers and the principal about
> keeping constant contact with all students…to purposely and intentionally know how
> everyone was doing and offer help.*

She also added:

> *In such a difficult moment, there was no way that our school would not **worry** about our
> emotional well-being. This is mainly because teachers care about us. They know each
> student by name; they know our life story that we told right at the beginning of our
> freshman year. They know our families and our social-economic status.*

Another quote on the same theme Empathy was:

> "I **worry** because I know my classmates due to the cooperative model, and I know they
> will be left out. I think the school prepared us for this pandemic or any other adversity
> that may come our way."

The passages above are essential in establishing her experience toward her friends, school staff, and the methodology. She uses the words _worry_ and _worried_ repeatedly as she refers to how she feels about others, showing empathy. The words worry, or worried were repeated 15 times during our interview, making it stand out from all others.

A second theme that also emerged in the second category was _Open-mindedness_. MG expresses it by stating:

> _The school also started a partnership with some psychology interns to help us. They taught classes on how to cope with the pandemic emotional effects and also offered individual psychological sessions. I used this free service. I found this to be very important._

Even though MG had never needed psychological help before the pandemic, she decided to try it out. She identified solutions for a personal problem and showed a great deal of open-mindedness.

Based on Saldana (2015) handbook I created this coding scheme for a clear understanding of categories and themes in this pilot study. Table 2 shows the scheme.

Table 2

Category 1: Covid Stress	Theme 1.1 - Frustration	Theme 1.2 - Fear
Category 2: Students Related School Experience During Covid	Theme 2.1 – Empathy	Theme 2.2 – Open-mindedness

To guard against blurring my meaning on MG's words, this pilot study included two 'member checks' (Maxwell, 2012). The first took place when the categories were chosen, and the second one after the themes emerged. MG was able to help me clarify some of her meaning. Another valuable tool used to reflect on my bias and create a thicker description of the event and my questions and doubts about the process was memoing.

Links with Conceptual Framework

These findings correlate directly with the proposed conceptual framework. MG shows to be a person who deals with issues cooperatively as she reaches out to family and school. MG also demonstrated that the school environment, through her friends, staff, and the methodology, has helped her develop two of the CASEL competencies. The first one is Social Awareness. She revealed the ability to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others. The second competency has to do with Responsible Decision-Making when MG decided to be open and try something new identifying solutions to a personal problem. MG's individual essence of the two phenomena was explicitly showed in her interview. She felt frustrated, fearful concerning the pandemic. And in relation to how cooperative learning has helped minimize these effects, she felt empathetic towards her friends and open-minded about decisions towards ways to reduce her stress. I believe that cooperative learning has had a positive impact on MG, but a complete study may be the way to understand other students and how they view cooperative learning in stressful times.

Potential Implications and Conclusion

There could be many vital implications if the findings of this pilot study correlate with the results of a full research study. According to these preliminary findings, cooperative learning might have the potential to help students minimize the effect of very stressful situations like the Covid-19 pandemic. So, further research needs to be implemented to make these correlations. After a complete research is done and findings are confirmed, there could be many implications for practice and policy. Cooperative Learning, as it is implemented in this school, should be part of teacher improvement training in every school district in Latin America. Also, in terms of policy, it would be crucial to implement a Cooperative Learning Course at the tertiary level, making it a requirement for education majors in all public universities in Latin America.

Covid has changed our lives dramatically in many unprecedented ways. Cooperative Learning could be a way to minimize the stressful effects of this terrible pandemic. Unfortunately, we still do not know when the situation will improve. As I am writing this conclusion, more people have died, and when you read this, even more. I hope that more students in this cooperative school have learned to be emphatic and tackle personal, interpersonal, and community resources to help them cope with such trying times. Cooperation can only produce positive outcomes; why not trying it in other schools?

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Interview Protocol Script

Background:
Before the interview, I contacted the principal, Elton Luz, to ask permission to interview three students. Together we came up with a strategy to make sure students and parents were comfortable with the interview. Elton suggested I contact my student mentee, MG, because she would know other students willing to participate. I contacted her, and she recruited two other students. Elton was kind enough to send the consent forms to the students and their families. After the consent forms were signed, I sent participants an email introducing myself and the motivation for doing this research. We exchanged emails about days and times that were more appropriate for them, and subsequently, I sent them the individual Zoom Links.

The interview:
- **Introduction**

Hello (name of participant). My name is Virginia Gomes. As I have said before in the email I sent you, I am from Brazil, but I have been living in the USA for the last 20 years. I always visit Brazil, and my goal as a Ph.D. student is to learn as much as I can about education and then be able to improve education in Brazil. Thank you for helping me understand more about your school's education, and thank you so much for taking your time to participate in this research interview. The goal is to understand if the cooperative methodology that has been applied in your school had any effect on the mechanisms to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic. And if so, how do these mechanisms work. This is a research study at the University of Maryland.

This interview will take approximately 60 minutes. It is essential that you understand that I am here to learn from you so I can help other students. Your information is entirely confidential, and if you decide to withdraw from this interview at any time, please feel free to do so. I will be digitally recording the interview and taking notes. Are you ok with it? You can receive a copy of the transcript if you would like. Do you have any questions? So, let's start:

- **Interview**

Question for Context:

1 - Tell me how was school life six months before the pandemic?

For the Description of the Phenomenon:

2 - What are the specific social and emotional issues you are experiencing during the pandemic in and out of school?

For the reflection of the phenomenon:

3 - How did you feel about these issues?

4 - What has been the impact of cooperative learning?
5 - What could be improved at school to help you minimize the social and emotional stress caused by the pandemic?

You did a great job! Thank you very much for your time. If you don't mind, I will probably be contacting you in the future for further clarifications.

The end.

Appendix B

Interview Transcripts – March 15th 2021 via Zoom
MG

How did you experience the pandemic?
This question can be answered my many ways. The emotional, academic, family relations. It has been a difficult, atypical time in all aspects of life. In school we don't have the daily contact. The family relations changed because before the pandemic I would spend all my day in school until 5 or 6pm. Now I spend my whole day at home.
In the emotional side also because we are isolated and we don't have the same contact because we are isolated.
It was difficult. In the beginning people were saying that it would take a long time to pass, but I always thought it would be quick. I was afraid but I was optimistic that it would pass quickly. When things started to get worse, I started to worry and became anxious. There was a lot of uncertainties, people I trusted did not know what was going to happen, the school did not know when classes would come back. I think fear and anxiety prevailed.
At home in the beginning, it was like a vacation at home, it was nice. But then everything shut down and my sister and my father spent all the time at home with my mom and I. Even though we have a good relationship, we had conflicts because we were together all the time. It was kind of hard. The financial side also weighed on us. It rocked our world for sure. We did not know how the next months were going to be financially.
The decree to stay home started in March, on the 17. I stayed home until August. My mom would go out only to buy food, but my sister and I spent many months at home. It affected my mental health because isolation really touches you. From March to August, I was home. In August I started to go out.

Do you think there were any positive side to all this?

Positive side? I think it is heavy to say that something that kills so many people could have a positive side. My truth is (the idea) that the world did turn upside down to teach me something is arrogant. I consider that arrogant. I think there were people that learned from it, that revised concepts. But obviously we should not need a pandemic for that.
I have a friend who lost his grandmother and I followed the hurtful journey of not being able to be together to support sim. That really touched my core. And people don't see that when they see only numbers on TV. They sanitize the news with numbers only. So, there is no way for me to accept the good side of it. And I do consider myself to be a very optimist person. My father got sick at work and he contaminated everyone at home in August. Fortunately, it was mild with no hospitalizations.

How it is to be a student at AP?

To be a student at AP (she laughs) si to live everything you would not live in any place else. The relationships you build, the way you are forced to build relationships. You are there very connected with people through feelings and higher goals, this changes you. Other schools are not like that. You even get surprised when you talk to someone from another school, from another

city because people see each other as competitors. At AP is not like that we focus always in cooperation. It looks like you are living a unique experience.

How were the school relationships during the pandemic?

It got everyone by surprise. We all worried in different levels, but we all worried.
There was a constant worry from the teachers and principal to maintain constant constant with students.
The class directors responsible for each class were always asking how everyone was doing, why some people were not looking at their WhatsApp messages to purposely and intentionally know how everyone was doing and offer help.
There were problems because in the beginning teachers would just send handouts with activities, but students were not motivated to complete them. There were some teachers restructuring but the way everything was handled was very reassuring.
In such a difficult moment, there was no way that our school would not worry about our emotional wellbeing, mainly because teachers know each student by name. They know our history that we told right in the beginning of freshman year. They know our family and our social economic situation. There are students that have a very different reality from mine. There are students that do not even have cell phones or internet access. We worry about them because they don't have the same opportunities as many of us. They do not have access to education during the pandemic and they will fall behind. This problem is being resolved by the state government to bring more equity to education.
I worry because I know my classmates due to the cooperative model and I know they will be left out. I think the school prepared us for this pandemic or any other adversity that may come our way. They prepared us in the sense that we don't just worry about our classmates, we know exactly why we worry, we know what they are going through. I also talk to the class director because I am the class leader and we had a meeting today at 10am and he said he talked to everyone except one person.
The school also started a partnership with some psychology interns to help us. They taught classes on how to cope with the pandemic emotional effects and also offered individual psychological sessions. I used this free service. I found this to be very important.

Appendix C

Interview Memo

My first interviewee was MG. She was chosen because she has experienced the two phenomena being studied, as required by the phenomenology methodology. First, she is a student at the school that utilized the cooperative learning methodology, and second because she has also experienced the Covid-19 pandemic. The interview took place by Zoom. I was in my apartment in the US, and she was in her house in Brazil.

I was nervous because I wanted it to be perfect from the start. I already knew MG since January when I met her for the first time at the school in Brazil. She has been my mentee ever since, and I should have been calm, but I was not. I had participated in research interviews before but not as the interviewer. It was my first time interviewing someone.

MG was in rural Northeast Brazil. Internet was weak, so MG decided to turn off her camera during the entire Zoom interview. I would have preferred to have seen her, but MG has a very expressive voice, so it did not bother me.

My greatest fear and ethical consideration were that her voice and feelings would be translated precisely as she was portraying, even though I knew this was not entirely possible because they would be interpreted through my biases. I also wanted to make sure MG knew we were a team trying to answer the research questions. So, I started through the things I could control. I told her I value her and her time and that this was a two-way street. I also told her the goal of the research and that I had five pre-structured questions, but other questions would probably emerge for the purpose of clarification and reflection. She seemed very comfortable with the situation and agreed when I asked to record the interview. She sounds excited about the whole process.

MG was highly articulated. I had already had other conversations with her and knew how smart she was. But during the interview, she seemed to know exactly what to say when I asked the questions. I now wonder if she was trying to impress me. Many people in Brazil dream of coming to live in the US; MG is not different. I am actually helping her apply to universities here in the US. Moreover, I had already sent an email introducing the research questions, so I wondered if I should have kept that information from her until the interview.

MG is 17 years old, mature, intelligent, focused. Because she was so descriptive in her explanation about her facts and feelings, I wanted to make sure I understood what she was saying. I tried not to interrupt her train of thought, but I think I still did that many times. I could have been a little less disruptive.

I noticed that MG made an effort to be true to her feelings and not hide them, even if that could be seen as rude or weird. I deeply appreciated her honesty. As the interview progressed, I started to relax and enjoy the process because I could feel that MG was also enjoying and intentionally sending a message about her and her community. My attention was very focused on her ideas and feelings. I did not take notes because I wanted to pay attention to her words and emotions. One aspect that stroke me the most was how caring and empathic MB was towards everyone. She put her family, her friends, even her teachers first. She felt frustrated for not being to help them more during the pandemic.

This process opened up a whole new world for me. I felt the privilege to be able to enter so deeply into someone's life. It was carefully planned, respectful, clear, insightful, and, in a sense, beautiful. In many instances, I felt emotional and almost cried. In the end, I have a much better picture, an enhanced view, of how MG experienced the pandemic and how the school helped her and her community to overcome some of the emotional effects of this event.