

Cooperative Learning and Social Movements – A Idea Worth Fighting For

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Cooperative Learning can be an essential tool to ignite critical conversations that could lead to social and solidarity movements. Students leave 12 years of schooling to enter the world of social and economic interactions and survival. They need to be prepared to recognize and understand personal, interpersonal, and social conflicts and find ways to manage them wisely in a more cooperative way in the search for a common goal. I will start this paper by igniting the discussion about activism and social movements in education. Then I will dive into the genesis of cooperative learning and its potential as a catalyst to ignite social movements. I will finalize with an example of Cooperative Learning and Solidary Education school in the northeast of Brazil that started as a social movement with the goal of improving the community educational and economic future. I draw upon the notion of robust egalitarianism described by Apple (2013), critical pedagogy, conflict resolution and solidarity as links between cooperative education and social movements.

A Cause Worth Fighting

Meaningful conversations about current issues have been happening since the beginning of time. It is inspiring to listen to people who have in the center of their lives an idea that they believe it is worth fighting for. They seem to have no fear of the consequences of their views. They are sure about the need for that idea. They seem to have found the answers to the most crucial questions, and they usually make others follow and become activists of their vision creating a social movement. They give activist identities and develop strategies that resonate with society, facilitating other struggles (Apple, 2013; Perry, 2018). These people have strong intellectual power and become our role models, our heroes, mentors, leaders, and inspiration.

Some ideas have resonated with me, and I hold them as my truths. The one I try to practice every day, was brought to me by a man who lived more than 2000 years ago, Jesus Christ. He came up with this radical view that we should treat others the way we want to be treated. When society was demanding an eye for an eye, he changed the common sense and introduced ideas of compassion, love, peace, brotherhood, respect for life, and for others to the mainstream conversation. Jesus Christ initiated what is today one of the largest religions in the world with more than 2 billion followers (Stefon, 2021). I cannot discuss the merit of the consequences of his beliefs because as social and creative beings, we humans will misrepresent, distort, and create our own truths. However, Jesus Christ ideas revolutionized our world, and they are still the foundation of many other movements such as the Human Rights, Democracy, Socialism, the Peace movements and others that are grounded on “robust egalitarianism” (Apple, 2013, p.151) which opens paths for individual and collective freedoms.

Jesus believed he was especial, that he was God on earth! He had no fear of consequences because, for him, this idea was the reason for living and he ended up dying because of it. In today’s scenario, the consequences for fighting for an idea or ideal can also be dire. When fighting for a cause people can lose their friends, their jobs, their careers, their livelihoods and, in many countries, their lives as well. That’s why activism and social movements should be “grounded in larger projects, respectful of our differences, connected to the process of building and defending decentered unities that will give us collective strength and mindful that the path will be long and difficult” (Apple, 2013, p.165). I evoke the names of many that were imprisoned or died for the ideal of a robust egalitarianism in different fronts in Brazil:

Chico Mendes – Assassinated for being an activist for human rights and the environment in 1988
Lula da Silva – Imprisoned for fighting for social reform in 2017-2021
Marielle Franco – Assassinated for being an activist against police brutality in 2018
Tarcisio Leitao – Imprisoned for fighting for economic equality from 1960-1970

Social Movements and Education

According to Della Porta (2020), social movements “refer to voluntary participation oriented to the realization of the common good, defying visions of human beings as mainly self-interested” (p.938). Social movements point toward the role of conflict, the transgressive nature of protest voicing the beliefs of challengers of the system contributing to the democratic participation in an unconventional way as part of the political process (Della Porta, 2020). These movements were once limited to the field of social science but since 1970 social movements have entered other disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, and philosophy. However, little attention has been given to poor’s people movement, solidarity activities or anti-colonial movements (Della Porta, 2020).

Fortunately, there may be a permanent shift coming as the social movement discourse recently pierced the field of education. The Comparative and International Education Society 2021 conference held its annual conference in April 2021 with the theme Social Responsibility Within Changing Contexts. Many of the panels focused on social movements, for example: 1 - How Children’s books Become Powerfully Engaging Tools for Critical Thinking and Social Movements; 2 - The Youth Turn: Youth Movements and the Struggle for Public Education in Brazil; 3 – Social Movement Learning and Knowledge Production in Times of Conflict (CIES 65th Annual Meeting Program, 2021). Being a novice as a PhD student, I feel hopeful that the transgressive discourse is coming to the mainstream and words like social movements, socialism, activism, and cooperation are spotlights in such important events. I also hope that these spotlights build the foundation to shift the hegemonic and colonial rhetoric education is part of. The goal of education should be to improve society and we all have a responsibility to ignite and

reignite these new and old conversations of transformation and move them forward as part of a more egalitarian society.

With the pitfalls of neoliberal mainstream ideas and its consequences of unrestricted growth and development, such as increased levels of social inequalities, inability to solve the unemployment crisis and environmental destruction, revising what we considered to be the goals of education is paramount. How are we going to help the next generation to recover existing alternatives ideas and propose new ones? How can we equip them with the right tools to recognize and manage these conflicts that come from marginalization and power imbalances and help them start the journey to a sustainable living and radical democracy? The conflict that originated from marginalization and power imbalances which are the source of social movements is hard to deal with, especially in a public-school setting. Working in a high school for 8 years, I was asked many times by the principal to “not rock the boat” or “not make waves”. We need to learn how to deal and manage conflict because they are what moves society forward; however, it does not come naturally. Conflict Management and Resolution classes and seminars are increasingly being disseminated as part of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies. Unfortunately, they are very sporadic and do not offer constant follow ups (Haymovitz et al.,2017 and Trach et al., 2018) minimizing its effectiveness.

Cooperative Learning makes conflict management and resolution a daily occurrence in the lives of students and teachers. Students leave 12 years of schooling to enter the world of social interaction and survival. They need not only to be prepared to recognize and understand personal, interpersonal and social conflicts but also find ways to manage them wisely in a more effective way.

Where does Cooperative Learning Come from?

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 studied 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 results. This 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 to be 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. It yields to positive characteristics such as effective communication, friendships, and the willingness to boost other's power (Deutsch, 1949). Cooperative processes are constructive and positive in nature, 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 and that is the one we are focusing on in this paper.

Johnson and Johnson 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 is the use of 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 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. Students need to learn how to cooperate.

An extensive literature review found most studies on the effectiveness of cooperative learning inconclusive. However, the study concludes that “most teachers do not implement the most basic components of cooperative learning” (Wehby & Gunter, 2000, p.235) and that levels of cooperative behavior should be assessed before implementation. Cooperative skills such as conflict resolution, decision making, trust-building skills need to be taught explicitly and prior to

students start learning through CL. These contextual factors relate intimately with the success of CL and are the key for methodological evaluation (Wehby & Gunter, 2000).

Cooperative Learning is also sometimes perceived solely as a strategy to improve academic skills, hindering students' potential to learn other essential skills. 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 the learning of different skills and contribute to a shared goal. Thus, educators miss a viable opportunity for students to be challenged and improve their social and emotional competencies.

Cooperative Learning and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Two of the main positive outcomes of cooperative education are the personal relationships it helps create and the enhancement of students' social and emotional competencies. Based on over 180 studies that have been conducted since 1940, David and Roger Johnson write extensively on how 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.

Cooperative Learning needs to come into play to keep Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practice alive every day. In an extensive literature review that addresses SEL in groups, the authors support the use of CL 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. With

enhanced social and emotional skills, students will likely be more equipped to manage conflict in their daily lives, in social movement, in their political engagement and in their future work lives.

Cooperative Learning and Critical Pedagogy

There is no research that links cooperative learning (CL) and critical pedagogy. However, because cooperative learning has dialogue as a method and social and emotional competencies as outcomes, it indicates that CL may be the best method to introduce critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire (1968) asserts that students and teachers should be able to dialogue and problematize with mutual trust, a radical idea at the time. Cooperative Learning has dialogue and horizontal relationships between teacher and students at its foundation.

Colonialism and its legacy of marginalization and power imbalance have led the Global South to underestimate their own culture and history believing that they have no say, no truth, no value, and need to learn from their north and developed countries. “The legacy of Western colonization remains too powerful” (Silova et al. 2020, p.4). Through CL this critical discourse can be introduced easily turning schools into places of dialogue for change that may lead to freedom of oppression and a path to a better and more prosperous world for everyone through social movements. The following session tell a story of liberation of an oppressive situation through a social movement that have created other opportunities of social movements through cooperative learning.

PRECE a Social Movement in the Northeast of Brazil

PRECE (Programa Educacional Coração de Estudante – Educational Program Heart of a Student) is social movement founded in 1994 by 7 young adults and a university professor, in the community of Cipo, a rural low-income area of the city of Pentecoste³ in the state of Ceara, Brazil. The group believed that, although there were no secondary schools nearby, they could be

given a second chance out of poverty through higher education if they study together in a cooperative way. A big bold goal for a community where most would stop schooling in 4th grade (Lessa et al., 2016). According to the PRECE website (www.prece.ufc.br) and interviews with PRECE staff, Manoel Andrade, the university professor, was born in Cipo but lives in Fortaleza, the capital of the state, which is 60 miles from Pentecoste. He would come back every weekend to give guidance and be a role model for the group who decided, to not only study together but also live together in an abandoned farmhouse. They signed up to receive the distant learning packages to complete secondary school and each one, taking advantage of their academic strengths, helped one another to succeed. As a social movement, their common goal was to transform their lives through education creating a counter-hegemonic knowledge based on the notion that not only the rich and white people had the right to continue their education and have a better life. They also had this right.

They went through many struggles including discrimination among community people who considered them vagabonds and homosexuals. But studying together, sharing, and overcoming their struggles together, made them more resilient and much stronger as a group which would become one of the most influential movements in the state. The PRECE movement has collective responsibilities and goals of helping each other to learn and succeed. They restore collective memories and become resources of hope for others by overcoming struggles and succeeding in their tasks together. They understand and fight against the imbalance of intersectional oppression which included race and class. And they work towards the long-term goal (Apple, 2013) of studying hard, being accepted to a free university and graduating. They create radical possibilities; a path that, in the beginning, only a few believed but it was an idea worth fighting for.

In 1996, the first student, Toinho, was accepted to the Federal University of Ceara (from now on known as the university), ranking in 1st place! That provided an enormous boost of confidence to the group. Toinho moved to the university which was free of charge and included room and board. But he would come back every weekend (together with Manoel, the university professor) to Cipo to help the group and tell all the stories of his experiences at the university. In 1998, the second one was accepted. News spread like fire “making victories public” (Apple, 2013, p.162) and now students were coming from all parts of the region. From this point forward, PRECE was known by the population as a movement that, if you work together, you would be accepted at the university and would be on the way to a better life!

Between 2001 and 2002, 15 students were accepted to the university and they would all come back on the weekends to help the ever-growing group. Solidarity was impressive! About one hundred students would come to study at the farmhouse with the dream of going to college and have a better life. They studied in groups of 3-5 students and would change groups according to subjects. With the inspiration and guidance of former students from PRECE, the movement grew larger every year and by 2005 PRECE had opened 13 other locations in the region and was focused on after-school tutoring called Popular Cooperative Schools (Escolas Populares Cooperativas – EPC). They incorporated many supporters to drive students back and forth from the university to PRECE locations, including the City of Pentecoste, churches, and families. They all started to believe in the power of working in groups and accomplishing their goals. Social movements trigger changes beyond their boarder, igniting other latent movements (Perry, 2018).

By 2006, 91 students from the PRECE movement had been accepted to the university. These students were living in dire economic situations and before this program, they believed

that going to college was unattainable, unfeasible, entirely impossible. The old hegemonic common sense changed, guided by solidarity, a larger vision and the idea of a more robust egalitarianism.

Unlikely Partnerships and Significant Milestones

The PRECE movement journey has been one with many milestones and accomplishments. In 2009 the movement initiated a partnership with the icons of cooperative learning in the United States, David and Roger Johnson. The two brothers are the founders of the Cooperative Learning Institute at the University of Minnesota and co-wrote more than 500 research articles and book chapters and wrote more than 50 books on the cooperative learning methodology. They are co-laureates of the Brock International Award in Education Innovation in 2007 and many other awards throughout their lives. Their work on cooperative learning is considered to be “the single most important strategy for improving learning in the classroom and schools...” (James Perry, Brock Prize in Education Innovation).

This unlikely partnership became an important step to the movement because it provided the foundation of what it is today PRECE Cooperative and Solidary Education principles. Besides the five principals of cooperative learning described in the literature review. PRECE incorporated 3 other solidarity principals: 1 - community building through life story sharing; 2 – community project by students and staff; and 3 – alumni role modeling. Besides the role of cooperative learning of building conflict resolution skills, the complete PRECE methodology which incorporates solidarity is today the catalysts for building social movements, as I will explain latter.

Because of its results as a social and educational movement, PRECE formed another important partnership. In 2011 the state government decided to apply the PRECE Cooperative

and Solidarity methodology in a public high school in Pentecoste. Alan Pinho Tabosa High School (from now on known as APTHS) is today an example of how education can change the lives of their students, staff, and the community. It holds currently 524 low-income students and 29 teachers and staff. Seventy three percent of current teachers are PRECE alumni. Professor Manoel Andrade explains: “We cannot just through kids in the classroom and ask them to work in groups, they need to know how to do that effectively”. So besides the Johnson and Johnson cooperative learning strategies and the solidarity components listed above, the curriculum includes classes to develop empathy, patience, mutual respect, and conflict resolution. They also learn to work in groups, express themselves, respect different opinions, and to care for others. These classes are administrated before students start the school year and all year around, as part of the leadership classes.

The results are visible, not only on standard measurements such as number of college acceptances (about 100 students are accepted to college every year) and national test scores, but also, and most importantly, on the desire of students to transform and improve their lives and the community through social and solidarity movements.

The desire of students to transform and improve their lives and the community are the signature at APTHS. Protagonism is also emblematic in the community. They feel empowered to face personal, interpersonal, and community challenges. Referring again to Della Porta (2020), social movements definition as “voluntary participation oriented to the realization of the common good, defying visions of human beings as mainly self-interested” (p.938), we can consider the creation of social movements by the school very significant. Here are some examples:

1 - Movement to Defend Public Schools

Problem: Allow more access to education

Goal: Increase investment in public education and also start distance learning higher education in the region.

Actions: walks, radios programs, election supervision, t-shirts, seminars, discussion with the mayor, etc.

2 - The Establishment of the Agency for Local Economic Development (ADEL)

Problem: Poverty and Food Insecurity

Goal: Support small farmers in vulnerable situations focusing on strengthening family farming.

Actions: Access to knowledge, credit, networks, and technologies so that they can find favorable conditions to start small businesses in their communities. Adel has won many awards including *twice* the OMD Brasil (Objetivos de Desenvolvimento do Milenio) which awards NGOs for achieving one of the Millennium Development Goals in 2012 and 2013.

3 –Solidary Education – Discovering Dreams and Smiles

Problem: Violence

Goal: Bring children a better chance to be happy and succeed in school.

Actions: Math and reading tutoring and a game playing to give children a dignifying childhood.

At APTHS, students are busy with in-school projects and community projects. They see a problem and they feel compelled and empowered to solve it. Below is a list of a few more:

- Caring for the School – Help keep the school clean and beautiful
Problem: Lack of school staff
- Solidarity Reviewers – Students review other students' essays

Problem: Succeed the university entrance exam

- CO2Operation – Promotes a better environment
Problem: Global warming
- Book Publishing about Fighting Children Sexual Abuse
Problem: Child abuse in the community
- Gender and Inequality Seminars
LGBT community discrimination

School Covid-19 Pandemic Solidarity Movement

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 the worsening of 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.

Brazil has not been different. The country has recorded 15 million cases of the virus and about 422 thousand deaths by May 07, 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).

On March 17, 2020, the federal government shutdown 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. Alan Pinho Tabosa was caught in the middle of a system that had to deal with a population of which 88.2% are low income, and only 17.2% of students have a computer at home (INEP, 2019). Students, staff and the

community did not cross their arms and waited for help. They did what they know how to do best, they created a solidarity movement. The school created weekly online meetings with classroom student leaders and teacher leaders and also WhatsApp groups encompassing all students in the school. In the words of one of their students, she explains how she felt:

*“It (the pandemic) got everyone by surprise. We all **worry** in 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.”*

*“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.”*

*“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.”*

Further Considerations

The Cooperative Learning and Solidarity Education is a seed of hope. Like any other methodology, it is a work in progress, especially with a new world Covid-19 order. Its foundation based on dialogue, horizontal relations, respect, and the search for a common goal, though, should be the point of start for all current classrooms all over the world. Morton Deustch’s research on competition has proven right through the results of a neoliberal world of environment destruction and social and economic decline. Cooperation is the way.

In their new book, *The New Systems Reader: Alternatives to a Failed Economy*, James Speth and Kathleen Courrier (2021) mention cooperation, cooperative, cooperatives and cooperatively 541 times. However, it is rare to see a cooperative learning course as part of a college of education major requirement in tertiary education.

Let's reignite these conversations and include words such as dialogue, justice, cooperation, discrimination, collaboration, respect for life, social movements, conflict, respect, diversity, solidarity, reciprocity, interdependence, love, simplicity, justice, dignity, and joy. Also, we should be including critical questions such as Why am I poor? How can I change this situation? Who is responsible for this situation? What if we did it differently? Let's try a different approach. Who is benefiting from this situation?

Through cooperative learning we have the right setup to start asking questions, teaching and learning with one another and possibly start a movement for robust egalitarianism through critical pedagogy and solidarity. Why not trying? I believe this idea is worth fighting for.

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