

# The school cooperative in Early Childhood Education: a Freinet Technique<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Célestin Freinet (1896–1966) left as his legacy not only numerous discoveries but also a set of techniques to be applied with children from the perspective of Education through Work, that is, the production of popular knowledge and culture aimed at forming democratic citizens. One of these techniques is the School Cooperative, which brings together children and teachers in a project that addresses issues related to democracy, planning, self-regulation of behavior, research, implementation of actions, and documentation of achievements. This article aims to present the results of a School Cooperative carried out at a municipal school in Marília, São Paulo, whose Political Pedagogical Project (PPP) is grounded in Freinetian principles. The technique was implemented by a teacher and her 26 students aged between five and six years.

**KEYWORDS:** Education; Freinet techniques; School Cooperative.

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*A cooperativa escolar na Educação Infantil: uma técnica Freinet***RESUMO**

Célestin Freinet (1896-1966) deixou como legado, além de muitas descobertas, técnicas para serem trabalhadas com as crianças sob a perspectiva da Educação do Trabalho, ou seja, produção de saberes e culturas do povo para formação do cidadão democrático. Uma delas é a Cooperativa Escolar, que reúne crianças e professoras em um projeto que abrange questões relacionadas à democracia, ao planejamento, ao autocontrole da conduta, à pesquisa, à execução de atos e ao registro de feitos. Este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar os resultados de uma Cooperativa Escolar realizada em uma escola municipal em Marília-SP, que apresenta princípios freinetianos, em seu Projeto Político Pedagógico (PPP). A técnica foi realizada por uma professora e suas 26 crianças com idades entre cinco e seis anos.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Educação; Técnicas Freinet; Cooperativa Escolar.

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Célestin Freinet (1896-1966) dejó como legado, además de muchos descubrimientos, técnicas para trabajar con los niños desde la perspectiva de la Educación para el Trabajo, es decir, la producción de conocimientos y culturas de los pueblos para formar ciudadanos democráticos. Una de ellas es la Cooperativa Escolar, que reúne a niños y profesores en un proyecto que abarca temas relacionados con la democracia, la planificación, el autocontrol de la conducta, la investigación, la ejecución de actos y el registro de eventos. Este artículo tiene como objetivo presentar los resultados de una Cooperativa Escolar realizada en una escuela municipal de Marília-SP, que presenta principios freinetianos, en su Proyecto Político Pedagógico (PPP). La técnica fue realizada por una maestra y sus 26 niños de entre cinco y seis años.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Educación; Técnicas de Freinet; Cooperativa Escolar.

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*“The child, in their spontaneity, is always creative, and the school must provide opportunities for them to express their thoughts, dreams, and joys freely.”*  
(Scarpato, 2017, p. 623)

## Introduction

Célestin Freinet (1998) advocates for an education grounded in work, through which the child becomes the protagonist of their learning process. The teacher, therefore, does not occupy the central role, as in traditional education, but rather serves as a mediator of relationships, whether among group members, between individuals and objects, or between individuals and the world. Freinet (2001, p. 131) states that the true school cooperative is organized as a “society of children who are capable of managing almost the entirety of school life.” In this sense, it becomes clear how important it is to listen to children and to allow them to contribute their knowledge to decision-making processes.

Freinet’s pedagogy highlights how education is a collaborative endeavor aimed at forming a reflective individual, capable of developing self-regulation, recognizing their rights, and learning to exercise them. In this approach, all school activities are linked to the children’s own interests and to their exchanges with others, the environment, and objects. For this reason, Freinet (2001) uses the term “almost the entirety,” as it refers to ideals that will only be fully realized when the entire school community embraces education from the perspective of work-based learning, an approach in which activity guides practice toward the ultimate goal of forming individuals through free and creative work, essential for democratic and emancipatory human development.

Sampaio (1994, p. 97) asserts that “the democracy of tomorrow is prepared within the democracy of the school. An authoritarian regime within the school would not be capable of forming democratic citizens.” From this perspective, it is impossible to separate the ideal of democracy from the

techniques developed by Freinet, since democracy is the foundation of all actions carried out in the school when guided by respect, collaboration, and cultural exchange. For this reason, it is essential to envision an education that does not merely serve alienating immediacy but instead prepares children to reflect and act in the present and the future, leaving records of their actions to inspire others who, in turn, will learn to reflect and act in the days to come.

For this reason, it is essential to put into practice the complete set of techniques that compose Freinet's Pedagogy, including free writing, field classes, interschool correspondence, wall newspapers, the book of life, workshops, assemblies, the school press, and the school file system, with full awareness of their ideological foundations. Without the underlying conceptions of human nature, the world, and knowledge on which the French educator built his pedagogical framework, such work may risk becoming nothing more than the application of sterile techniques.

In this article, the focus is on reflecting on the cooperative's practice in the school environment to demonstrate to the reader that it is possible to develop a democratic atmosphere even with very young children, based on perspectives and actions similar to those of an adult cooperative. The purpose is to foster listening, respect, exchange, and mutual effect, understood as a "way of relating to other children, to adults, and to the things that make up the world around them" (Koble and Paredes, 2020, p. 252). By participating in cooperative meetings in the classroom and understanding their organization, children can begin to develop democratic practices in their present lives and, in the future, enact them as citizens capable of listening, reflecting, designing projects, executing actions, recording events, and standing up for their rights. Ultimately, they become human beings who contribute to the development of society and the preservation of the planet.

According to the encyclopedic definition, a cooperative is a society formed by at least twenty people, managed in a democratic and participatory manner, and organized around shared economic and social objectives. The members themselves, along with their leaders and representatives, hold full responsibility for the management and supervision of the cooperative. Such initiatives may arise from within the group itself or be motivated by development agents responding to shared needs. In general, the steps involved in establishing a cooperative include the initial initiative, exchange of experiences, mobilization, preliminary meetings for clarification and founding, creation and approval of the work plan in an assembly, and joint implementation. According to Lima (2022, p. 119), "all Freinetian entrepreneurship opposes authoritarianism [...] and is connected to democracy, cooperation, student self-organization, and the right to speak, among others."

In this sense, the school cooperative serves as an excellent counterpoint to authoritarian practices, since it allows children to become the authors of their processes of knowledge acquisition. After all, all stages of a school cooperative are related to their interests, their sense of agency, and democracy itself, as they begin from a problem situation, formulate hypotheses, investigate, act, and ultimately achieve—or not—the objectives initially established.

### **The Freinet Cooperative**

Within the Freinet Pedagogy movement, the school cooperative is experienced as an initiation into social life. Cooperative work plays an effective role when the class group functions as a small society. It promotes elections, debates, division of tasks and responsibilities, maintains control over ongoing projects, and presents proposals for new initiatives. According to Toraille (as cited in Paulhies & Barre, 1968, p. 2),

The school cooperative is a student society based on its members' work. It aims to develop among them a sense of responsibility and active solidarity, enabling them to fulfill their roles as citizens in a free democracy. The cooperative may, of course, have a store that engages in economic activities, but these are of secondary importance, and the term 'cooperative' cannot correctly be applied to them.

The author seeks to show that, in Freinet Pedagogy, the effort lies in organizing school life around techniques such as free writing, correspondence, the school newspaper, work plans, conferences, and individualized work through cards or videos. All these activities are marked by the cooperative seal of that class group, from that specific year, leaving a legacy for future cohorts. Although in some project proposals money is one of the necessary conditions for implementation, it is never the ultimate goal of a school cooperative.

The following section presents and analyzes data in accordance with the principles of a school cooperative as conceived by Freinet.

## **Methodology**

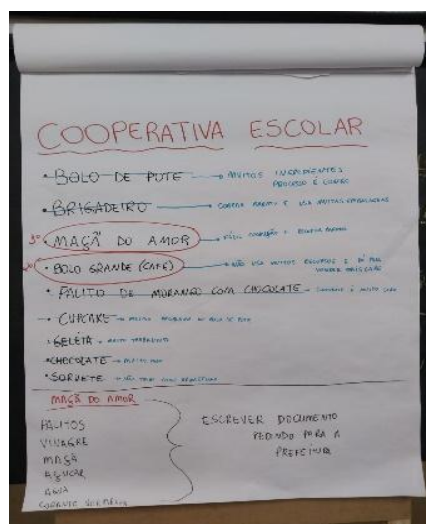
All the work reported in this study was carried out at the Municipal Early Childhood Education School (Escola Municipal de Educação Infantil – EMEI) Sambalelê, located in the southern area of the city of Marília, São Paulo. According to its Political Pedagogical Project (PPP, 2023, p. 2), "the doctrinal framework of the PPP already encompasses Historical-Cultural Theory, Freinet Pedagogy, and the elements of the Periodization of Child Development." The school cooperative technique was implemented in 2023 by teacher Máira Zibordi and twenty-six children aged between five and six years, members of the Early Childhood Education II class known as the "Butterfly Class," who attended school on a full-time basis.

In the second semester of 2023, during one of the daily discussion circles, the children expressed a desire to go on field trips and purchase costumes. However, they soon realized that they would need money to make this possible. After suggesting several imaginative but impractical ideas for achieving these goals, teacher Maíra, with the support of coordinator Ana Guedes, introduced the possibility of creating a School Cooperative —a Freinet technique and therefore supported by the school's PPP.

In Early Childhood Education, the discussion circle is practiced daily as a working technique. During these sessions, children share their questions and recount experiences. Occasionally, one of the topics raised during these exchanges needs to be taken to a cooperative meeting, which has two primary purposes: to assess the situation discussed and to prepare for the work required by the proposed initiative.

After the initial explanations, the class decided to conduct a research project on what a cooperative is, the requirements for creating one, its advantages, and its functions. Equipped with this information, the children collectively planned how to raise money by selling something, including an analysis of the costs and benefits for each proposed item. Some suggestions were jar cakes, ice cream, jam, and chocolate-covered strawberries.

**Image 1.** Analysis chart of the cooperative's product options



**Source:** Teacher's personal archive.



The children analyzed each product, listing pros and cons. Jar cakes were ruled out because they required many ingredients and a long preparation process. The idea of making brigadeiros was also discarded since it would require numerous packages and yield very little profit. Chocolate-covered strawberries were eliminated due to the high cost of raw materials, as chocolate is expensive. The production of ice cream was likewise rejected because there was no way to store large quantities for sale.

After evaluating all the possibilities, costs, challenges, and benefits, the class chose to sell candied apples (maçãs-do-amor) because of their practicality and profitability. They selected a recipe from the internet with the teacher's assistance, gathered the ingredients, and conducted a test themselves. Together with the teacher, who throughout the process acted as a mediator among the children, the materials, the knowledge, and the spaces where the work took place, they produced their own candied apples.

**Image 2.** Children producing the candied apples



**Source:** Teacher's personal archive.



**Image 3.** Student caramelizing an apple with the teacher's support



**Source:** Teacher's personal archive.

With the product ready, tasted, and approved, the children began to think of strategies for selling it. They decided to ask their families for help. Participation in the sales was optional, but almost all families contributed, as did the school staff, who purchased several vouchers or tickets, as will be explained below. Another vital source of support came from the interns of the Pedagogical Residency Program (PRP) at UNESP in Marília, who accompanied the class. They sold the vouchers to acquaintances, teachers, and students.

The class also received help from one of the school's teachers, who donated small containers shaped like *brigadeiro* cups to wrap the apples, creating a delicate package and adding value to the product.

**Image 4.** Finished candied apple



**Source:** Teacher's personal archive.

Sales were conducted through tickets labeled “candied apple voucher,” which were delivered at the time of purchase and sold in advance so the teacher and students could plan the quantity to be produced. On the date previously written on the voucher, the buyers were expected to come to the school, present their tickets, and collect their products in an orderly manner.

**Image 5.** Candied apple voucher



**Source:** Teacher's personal archive.

However, the sale of the apples far exceeded the teacher's and the children's expectations. They soon realized they would not be able to produce the number of apples already sold, as they did not have the space, materials, or logistics to exchange the vouchers for the apples. They decided to outsource production. With the teacher's help, they hired a company to make the apples, while they remained responsible for promotion, sales, and distribution.

On the long-awaited day of delivery, the children had to prepare the space for distribution, considering the regular school activities that continued as usual on a school day. This required resolving several practical matters, such as ensuring the event did not interfere with student dismissal and avoiding setting up tables in areas used by younger children, who are not legally allowed to access sweets within the school environment. They also wanted to make sure that customers would be received warmly. The group considered the materials they would need, who would be responsible for each task, and how they would organize themselves collectively and democratically to define the specific day and time.

Afterward, they made tablecloths from unbleached fabric and painted them to decorate the tables that would serve as display stands. They also made a banner featuring the cooperative's name so buyers could easily find the designated pickup area. The school provided the paints and brushes used. The children showed creativity in choosing what to write and used various colors. One of the interns cut and glued the title "COPERSAMBA" onto the banner using blue EVA foam. Everyone was prepared to greet customers, explain the project's origin and development, and present their product in an inviting and welcoming manner.

On the scheduled delivery day, the children prepared the school kiosk to turn it into a functioning service station. They decorated the space with the help of the teacher and the interns, hanging balloons and a banner they had made themselves, and arranged the tables and

tablecloths in their proper places. Working collectively, they created a leaflet containing all the information about the cooperative's creation process, the project's execution, and its purpose. The leaflets were printed to be distributed when customers came to collect their products so that the community could understand the process experienced at the school and, at the same time, promote the appropriation of information, that is, of knowledge that leads to emancipation and, consequently, democracy. The leaflet was designed to help people visualize the entire process of the school cooperative created by the Butterfly Class.

To achieve this, the leaflet included a definition of a cooperative and then presented information about the class's creation of it. It also included the chronological sequence of events during the process, from selecting the product and developing production strategies to sales operations, concluding with information on the delivery of the candied apples and the children's and teachers' expressions of gratitude.

The children organized themselves to determine each participant's roles and responsibilities. Some were responsible for welcoming customers, others of explaining the details of the entire process, and the remaining children of distributing the leaflets, apples, and containers.

During the delivery period, the children took turns performing different tasks. Their autonomy, sense of responsibility, and commitment to the school cooperative were remarkable. After assembling the leaflets with the teacher, they became familiar with all the information in this record, which enabled them to prepare their presentation speeches based on what they had learned and experienced throughout the development of the school cooperative.

As customers arrived, one of the children was responsible for collecting the vouchers and communicating the number of items to the group in charge of counting and separating the apples for delivery. Meanwhile, two other students explained to the buyers the steps taken, from the cooperative's creation to the day of product delivery.

Many people, including family members, staff, UNESP professors, and friends, visited the school. In addition, the teacher and the interns were present at all times to provide the necessary support, acting only as mediators, since the children were the true protagonists of all the actions. It was a moment filled with learning and exchange, for both the children and the adults who took part in this meaningful experience.

**Image 6.** Delivery of the candied apples



**Source:** Teacher's personal archive.

## Discussion and Results

After the project was completed, the children met with the teacher to discuss how they could use the money they had raised, which was much higher than expected. Their initial goal had been to raise 500 reais to purchase costumes for the school's "Freinet Room" and to organize field trips. However, the final amount collected was more than triple the original goal, far exceeding all expectations. This outcome demonstrates that the School Cooperative is indeed an excellent technique for addressing themes in research, self-regulation, and democracy. It helps children develop in multiple dimensions, including learning to make

decisions, take responsibility for their consequences, and, most importantly, understand that carrying out a project together is possible.

After this meaningful process and the acquisition of extensive knowledge, the children decided democratically how to use the funds fairly that would benefit the entire class. They also considered the rest of the school community. The children agreed to choose something that all students could enjoy, since many people had supported the project by buying apples or helping promote it.

Together with the teacher, the school administration, and the Parents and Teachers Association (APM), the Butterfly Class decided to use the funds to purchase new buckets for the school playground. The old ones were in poor condition, and their replacement was urgent. One hundred thirty sets of buckets, sieves, and shovels were acquired so the children could play in the school's sandboxes and playground area.

Another improvement made due to the school cooperative was the creation of a new area called the "Butterfly Refreshing Space." This environment was designed so that all children at the school could cool off on hot days. It consists of four outdoor showers installed along a wall next to the playground. The investment was conceived to provide opportunities for interaction, exchange, and recreation during the school day, as well as to enable a range of play activities and projects in this space. The Butterfly Class had a deep affection for the school and wanted to leave their mark, since they were graduating from Early Childhood Education and would soon move to another institution. Therefore, they decided to allocate part of the funds raised to create this space. Once everything was ready, they organized an inauguration day, during which all the children at the school participated and had fun.



**Image 7.** Inauguration of the Refreshing Space.



**Source:** Teacher's personal archive.

**Image 8.** Display board of the space.



**Source:** Teacher's personal archive.

These were not the only initiatives carried out by the Butterfly Class. At the end of the second semester, close to the end of the school year and the graduation ceremony, the children went to a private recreation area funded by the cooperative's resources to spend the day with their friends. The place had a swimming pool, games, and ample space for outdoor activities. Every detail was carefully planned to ensure everything went well and the children could make the most of the experience. Their joy was evident throughout the day. Their words and expressions showed how happy and entertained they were. They enjoyed the pool and the recreation area to the fullest, had a



picnic, and ate ice cream, creating an unforgettable day that will likely remain in their memories.

This moment was significant for the children after a year filled with hard work and learning. It also allowed them to strengthen interactions among classmates, the teacher, and the interns, as well as with the space and the materials involved. Planning, along with self-regulation of behavior and emotions, was also an integral part of this process, which yielded highly positive results for the group.

## Conclusion

It is remarkable how Freinetian techniques are effective in shaping children during their school years as human beings in formation and as future citizens, since they encompass all aspects of a child's development. These aspects are directly related to human emancipation, enabling children to become reflective and active participants in their practices and to achieve the holistic education proposed by Lenoir (2014, n.p.):

Education must be holistic. It must, without establishing a hierarchy among different kinds of knowledge, allow for the development of the hand as much as of the mind, of the individual as much as of their capacity to cooperate, on equal terms with others. [...] [This implies] absolute distrust in the ability of the state, an instrument of domination by its very nature, to promote the sharing of knowledge and to develop pedagogical processes that generate awareness and freedom.

Academic texts of this nature, which highlight techniques grounded in theory and proven effective in real school settings, particularly in public education networks and large classes, are of great importance. They demonstrate to education professionals that it is indeed possible to practice an education that humanizes, democratizes, and transforms, in which the

child becomes the protagonist of their learning process and the teacher acts as a mediator of relationships.

For this to happen, mutual collaboration among students, teachers, administrators, and families is essential, along with a strong theoretical foundation, since sterile and lifeless technique bears no fruit. Education professionals must engage with theory continuously across all school environments and plan together with the children, because children show genuine interest in activities proposed by the teacher and their classmates when these are genuinely connected to real life. Throughout the implementation of this project, the children embraced its purposes and, in doing so, became familiar with written language, several of its genres, and its social and cultural functions through reading recipes and creating banners, vouchers, and leaflets.

Thus, it can be affirmed that the techniques developed by Freinet, including the School Cooperative addressed in this study, are indispensable for the education and development of children.

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