South–South cooperation in education and development: The ¡Yo, Sí Puedo! literacy method

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A B S T R A C T

This article addresses two tendencies within the international education and South–South cooperation literatures: the omission of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America-Peoples' Trade Agreement (ALBA-TCP) from discussions of South–South cooperation generally, and of the ALBA-TCP promoted ¡Yo, Sí Puedo! literacy method in particular. Central features of ¡Yo, Sí Puedo! are discussed, while the case of ¡Yo, Sí Puedo! in Nicaragua illustrates the main argument developed: ¡Yo, Sí Puedo! should not be regarded as 'best practice transfer' but as integral to South–South cooperation as Third World emancipation and transformation towards a socially just and democratic world order.

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1. Introduction

Two distinct though interrelated tendencies within the anglophone international and comparative education, adult and lifelong education, and South–South cooperation literatures can be observed: first, while formations such as 'BRICS' (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and individual members thereof receive considerable attention, there is a marked silence about South–South cooperation promoted by the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America-Peoples' Trade Agreement (Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América-Tratado de Comercio de los Pueblos, ALBA-TCP). Second, state-promoted mass adult literacy campaigns, a cornerstone of international and adult and non-formal education research at times of national liberation and decolonisation struggles in the 20th century, have virtually disappeared from scholarly and political attention post-1989. This would not be of greater relevance had two and a half decades of the hegemonisation of the 'education for all' discourse, the 'Millennium Development Goals', neoliberal public-private partnerships (such as the 'Global Campaign for Education') and civil societal initiatives (especially the 'Global Partnership for Education'), brought about significant improvements in access to basic education. However, an estimated 57 million children are still excluded from formal education and 774 million adults classified as illiterate (UNESCO, 2014a). In this context the current discussions of the 'post-2015' development agenda, once more dominated by the governments, institutions and organisations of the global core, are followed critically from the periphery while counter-hegemonic initiatives are being developed (Carbonnier et al., 2014; Enns, 2014; Hickling-Hudson et al., 2012; King, 2014; McGrath, 2014; Muhr, 2008, 2010a, 2013c). It is therefore surprising that the ALBA-TCP promoted ¡Yo, Sí Puedo![1] literacy method, as the potentially most significant expression of global South–South cooperation in education in the first decade of the 21st century, has received only marginal attention by academia in 'the North'.

This article addresses this absence, thereby adding to the scant literature on South–South cooperation in education in the 21st century. A brief outline of the notion of hegemony in conjunction with a historical sketch of South–South cooperation

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[1] Commonly, including the official discourse(s), '¡Yo, Sí Puedo!' is translated as 'Yes, I Can!'. I find this translation imprecise and have in previous work proposed I can do it!, as 'sí' in this context does not mean 'yes' but is used in an emphatic-affirmative way. Literally, '¡Yo, Sí Puedo!' would have to be translated as 'I Do Can!' (incorrect), by adding 'indeed' (I Can Indeed!) or by stressing the verb when speaking. Alternatively, perhaps the best translation is 'Sure I Can!' (UNESCO, 2014b). For purposes of consistency, the Castilian original will be used throughout this article. Translations from Castilian are the author's.

will be followed by a discussion of the decade-long protagonism of Cuban developmental internationalism in education and the more recent and growing role of Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution in reclaiming education at all levels as a free-of-charge public good, fundamental right and state responsibility. These policies have become inter- and transnationalised via the ALBA-TCP, of which the ¡Yo, Sí Puedo! is representative of one dimension of this multi-dimensional South–South development cooperation project. After all, it is the ALBA-TCP founding members Cuba and Venezuela that jointly – and jointly only – have the material, human and knowledge capabilities to promote a literacy campaign of, by now, global scope. While the Venezuelan petroleum resources provide a material base of the ALBA-TCP, 'Cuban socialism', as Helen Yaffe states, 'has been fundamental to inspiring and shaping' the initiative (Yaffe, 2013, p. 101). The case of ¡Yo, Sí Puedo! in Nicaragua illustrates the main argument of the article: that ¡Yo, Sí Puedo! should not be regarded as 'best practice transfer' among developing countries, but as integral to South–South cooperation as a collective counter-hegemonic process of Third World liberation and emancipation for structural transformation towards a socially just and democratic world order.[2]

2. Global counter-hegemony and South–South cooperation: Cuba, Venezuela, and the ALBA-TCP education cooperation

Hegemony in this article refers to the supremacy of a social group, which manifests itself in economic, intellectual, political and moral leadership, to which the subalterns give their active consent, while coercion is used only exceptionally as a disciplinary measure (Gramsci, 1971). The consensual element in hegemony, i.e. the 'acceptance by the ruled of a conception of the world that belongs to the rulers', which appears as 'common sense', mystifies the power relations upon which the order rests (Fiori cited in Carnoy, 1984, p. 68). Counter-hegemony thus requires offering 'new understandings and practices capable of replacing the dominant ones' (Santos and Rodríguez-Garavito, 2005, p. 18) whilst 'building up the sociopolitical base for change through the creation of new historic blocs' (Cox, 1996, p. 140). On this basis I have theorised the ALBA-TCP as a counter-hegemonic project that seeks the construction of socialism at and across different geographical scales (including the body, the local, national, regional, global) through the dialectic between the 'state-in-revolution' and the 'organised society': the former denotes the emancipatory activation of state power, that is, the state-promoted organisation of the popular classes for the reconfiguration of the bourgeois-colonial state. The latter, as a counter-hegemonic concept antithetical to liberal-bourgeois 'civil society', challenges the historical association of civil society with liberal individualism and a capitalist market society and means popular, mass-based organisation and the collective exercise of popular power through councils and movements as manifest-

ations of non-capitalist social relations (Muhr, 2008, 2010a,b, 2012, 2013b).[3]

Counter-hegemony is inherent to South–South cooperation as an idea, social practice and multi-dimensional set of processes, as it evolved during the post-World War II decades of political decolonisation: guided by structuralist and dependency theoretical thinking, Third World nations collectively sought greater economic independence from the centres of the bipolar 'Cold War' world order to overcome their perceived under-development. This process started with the 1955 Bandung Conference, followed by the foundation of the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) in Belgrade in 1961, where the Cuban government (following the successful revolution against the USA-supported Bastista dictatorship on 1 January 1959) was the only Latin American-Caribbean state that participated as a member with a full delegation (Domínguez, 1989, p. 221) (I use 'Latin America-Caribbean' rather than 'Latin America and the Caribbean' to conceptually underscore the indivisibility of the geographical area, as expressed in Simón Bolívar's vision of 'Patria Grande' (the Grand Motherland) and José Martí's 'Nuestra América' (Our America)). In 1964, during the first session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Group of 77 (G-77) was founded, which today is composed of 134 developing nations, and whose critique of the unequal terms of trade led in 1974 to the UN Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO). These counter-hegemonic efforts peaked with the 1978 Buenos Aires Plan of Action for Promoting and Implementing Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries, signed by 138 governments.

Michelle Morais de Sá e Silva characterises these three decades of South–South cooperation as a phase of 'self-reliance and political strengthening' (1949–1979), followed by 'demobilization' (1980–1998) associated with the neoliberal counter-offensive from within the capitalist core countries in the context of the 'debt crisis' and structural adjustment policies (Sá e Silva, 2009). A third phase can be identified from 1999 on with the World Bank's creation of the Global Development Network (GDN) and the emergence of North–South–South triangular collaboration, in which international agencies and Northern governments act as 'brokers' for 'best practice transfer' (or 'policy transfer') among developing countries (Sá e Silva, 2009). The practice of 'best practice transfer' originates in business management and has been defined as a 'firm's replication of an internal practice that is performed in a superior way in some part of the organisation and is deemed superior to internal alternate practices and known alternatives outside the company'; in other words, it means the 'movement of knowledge within the organization' (Szulanski, 1996, p. 28). With the World Bank adopting its self-styled role as a global 'knowledge bank' in the late 1990s, it simultaneously assumed the role of a 'monitor and lender of "best practices"', with other organisations of global governance, including Transparency International and United Nations (UN) agencies, following suit: together with such donor conditionalities as efficiency and effectiveness (performance enhancement) and practices of benchmarking, ranking and scoring, best practice transfer has been considered to advance

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[2] As stated, this article advances a critique of existing literature in the fields of international and comparative education, adult and lifelong education, and South–South cooperation more generally. The empirical research upon which the discussion is based forms part of a larger socio-spatial ethnographic study of the construction of the ALBA-TCP, drawing from Michael Burawoy's reflexive science model and extended case method, as well as George Marcus' multi-sited ethnography. Seventeen months of fieldwork in different places at multiple scales (local, national, regional) in Brazil, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Venezuela have been conducted since 2005. Research in Nicaragua was conducted in 2006 (two weeks) and 2009 (four weeks), involving participant observation and field notes, 31 recorded interviews, and document and critical discourse analysis.

[3] The schematic, analytical presentation of key aspects of the ALBA-TCP in this section is necessarily selective and serves the arguments developed in this article. For background readings on the historical evolution of the ALBA-TCP, including its construction in Nicaragua, see Lambie and Alzugaray Treto (2011) and Muhr (2008, 2013a,c),),). The counter-posing of 'civil society' with 'organised society' constitutes a theoretical and structuralist critique of 'civil society', that is, the promotion of 'civil society organisations' and 'non-government organisations' as structurally integral to neoliberalisation and the privatization of state responsibilities, rather than empirical in the sense of a critique of abusive practices by individual organisations (such as with respect to dampening, misdirecting or co-opting social protest, see Choudry and Kapoor, 2013).