

A BRAZILIAN PEER SUPPORT SYSTEM AMONG EQUALS: CARE AND SUPPORT COMMUNITIES AMONG STUDENTS

UM SISTEMA DE APOIO ENTRE IGUAIS (SAI) BRASILEIRO: AS COMUNIDADES DE CUIDADO E APOIO ENTRE ESTUDANTES

UN SISTEMA DE APOYO ENTRE IGUALES BRASILEÑO: *COMUNIDADES DE CUIDADO Y APOYO ENTRE ESTUDIANTES*

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Abstract:

This article presents an overview of the research that describes and supports the implementation of a type of Peer Support System in Brazil—the Help Teams—from their initial implementation to the shift towards a completely Brazilian model—the Student Care and Support Communities. It presents a set of exploratory, descriptive, comparative, quantitative, and qualitative investigations. These investigations involved 3276 adolescent boys and girls in the 7th, 8th, and 9th grades of the final years of elementary school in public and private schools, and sought to compare, from the adolescents' perspective, their involvement in bullying situations, their perception of modern racism, emotional distress, and their feelings of hope and belonging among students from schools with and without an implemented Peer Support System (Help Teams). The results indicate that where there are Support Teams, there is evidence of lower victimization rates and less perception of racism, revealing that the Teams were effective in touching the ethical core of coexistence: the recognition of the other as legitimate and the daily practice of empathy. But times have changed—and with them, the challenges that adolescents face in life. This new scenario makes a new scope for the Support Team model urgent: Care and Support Communities. They are created to broaden the horizons of youth empowerment, uniting the ethical commitment of the old Support Teams and the care for the collective, being together, and hoping for the future.

Keywords: protagonism; peer support system; care and support communities; adolescence; caring coexistence.

Resumo:

Este artigo apresenta um panorama geral das pesquisas que descrevem e sustentam o trabalho de implementação de um tipo de Sistema de Apoio entre Iguais no Brasil – as Equipes de ajuda desde sua implementação até a mudança dada com a construção de um modelo completamente brasileiro – as Comunidades de Cuidado e Apoio entre Estudantes. Apresenta-se um conjunto de investigações, de natureza exploratória, descritivas, comparativas, quantitativas e qualitativas. Em investigações contam com 3276 meninos e meninas adolescentes dos 7º, 8º e 9º anos dos anos finais do Ensino Fundamental de escolas públicas e particulares e buscou-se

responder ao objetivo de comparar, na percepção dos adolescentes, o envolvimento em situações de bullying, a percepção do racismo moderno, o sofrimento emocional, os sentimentos de esperança e de pertencimento entre estudantes de escolas com e sem um SAI implementado (as Equipes de Ajuda). Os resultados indicam que onde há Equipes de Ajuda, há evidências de menor frequência de vitimização e menor percepção de racismo, revelando que as Equipes foram eficazes em tocar o coração ético da convivência: o reconhecimento do outro como legítimo e a prática cotidiana da empatia. Mas os tempos mudaram — e com eles, os desafios que atravessam a vida dos adolescentes. Esse novo cenário torna urgente um novo escopo para o modelo de SAI: as Comunidades de Cuidado e Apoio. Elas nascem para ampliar os horizontes do protagonismo juvenil, unindo o compromisso ético das antigas Equipes de Ajuda e o cuidado com o coletivo, estar juntos e esperar o futuro.

Palavras-chaves: protagonismo; sistema de apoio entre iguais; comunidades de cuidado e apoio; adolescência; convivência cuidadosa.

Resumen:

Este artículo presenta una visión general de la investigación que describe y respalda la implementación de un tipo de Sistema de Apoyo entre Pares en Brasil, los Equipos de Ayuda, desde su implementación inicial hasta la transición hacia un modelo completamente brasileño: las Comunidades de Atención y Apoyo Estudiantil. Presenta un conjunto de investigaciones exploratorias, descriptivas, comparativas, cuantitativas y cualitativas. Estas investigaciones involucraron a 3276 adolescentes, niños y niñas, de los últimos años de la escuela primaria en escuelas públicas y privadas, y buscaron comparar, desde la perspectiva de los adolescentes, su participación en situaciones de acoso escolar, su percepción del racismo moderno, el sufrimiento emocional y sus sentimientos de esperanza y pertenencia entre estudiantes de escuelas con y sin un Sistema de Apoyo entre Pares implementado (Equipos de Ayuda). Los resultados indican que donde existen Equipos de Apoyo, hay evidencia de menores tasas de victimización y menor percepción de racismo, lo que revela que los Equipos fueron efectivos para tocar el núcleo ético de la convivencia: el reconocimiento del otro como legítimo y la práctica diaria de la empatía. Pero los tiempos han cambiado, y con ellos, los desafíos que enfrentan los adolescentes en la vida. Este nuevo escenario urge un nuevo enfoque para el modelo de Equipos de Apoyo: las Comunidades de Cuidado y Apoyo. Estas se crean para ampliar los horizontes del empoderamiento juvenil, uniendo el compromiso ético de los antiguos Equipos de Apoyo con el cuidado del colectivo, la convivencia y la esperanza en el futuro.

Palabras clave: protagonismo; sistema de apoyo entre pares; comunidades de cuidado y apoyo; adolescencia; convivencia cuidadosa.

Introduction

In recent decades, the school environment has increasingly become a space marked by intense social and emotional transformations, reflecting broader changes taking place in contemporary society. Issues such as bullying, social exclusion, emotional distress, and subtle forms of prejudice—including modern racism—underscore the need to rethink educational

practices aimed at fostering coexistence, emotional well-being, and the strengthening of bonds among students. In this context, Peer Support Systems (PSS)—known in Brazil as *Sistemas de Apoio entre Iguais* (SAI)—have consolidated themselves as an effective strategy for promoting youth protagonism, empathy, and solidarity within school settings (Cowie; Sharp, 1996).

In Brazil, beginning in 2015, the Group for Studies and Research in Moral Education (GEPEM) initiated the implementation of an adapted model of PSS known as *Equipes de Ajuda* (Helping Teams), inspired by the Spanish proposal developed by Martínez Avilés (2006). The consolidation of this model—grounded in empirical evidence—demonstrated significant results, including the reduction of bullying cases, improvements in school climate, and the strengthening of moral values such as respect, solidarity, and justice (Tognetta; Souza; Lapa, 2019; Bomfim, 2019; Lapa, 2019; Nadai, 2019; Souza; Tognetta, 2022).

However, the contemporary educational landscape—marked by new forms of emotional suffering, loneliness, and hopelessness among adolescents—presents challenges that go beyond the prevention of interpersonal conflicts. An increasing sense of non-belonging can be observed, alongside young people's difficulty in envisioning the future, which compromises both learning processes and interpersonal relationships in schools. As Baumeister and Leary (1995) and Allen *et al.* (2021) point out, the sense of belonging is a fundamental psychological need; its absence constitutes a risk factor for social isolation and emotional distress. These conditions highlight the need to revisit existing models of youth protagonism and ethical coexistence, seeking alternatives capable of addressing today's affective and social demands.

Accordingly, this article aims to present the developmental trajectory and transition from the Helping Teams model to a new proposal: *Communities of Care and Peer Support* (CCAs). The CCAs represent a conceptual and practical expansion of youth protagonism and are grounded in bell hooks's (2000, 2003) conception of community, which understands coexistence as a political and affective act supported by values of mutual care, solidarity, and collective responsibility.

This article, therefore, seeks to discuss the theoretical foundations supporting this shift, the empirical evidence that informs it, and the pedagogical implications for building ethical and caring forms of coexistence in Brazilian schools. The proposal of Communities of Care and Peer Support emerges as an educational response to the contemporary challenges of emotional distress, the erosion of belonging, and the crisis of hope among adolescents, reaffirming the school as a privileged space for building bonds, meaning, and a shared future.

Theoretical Framework

An overview of PSS around the world

The PSS emerged in English-speaking countries—particularly the United Kingdom—as well as in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand during the 1970s and 1980s. In the United Kingdom, these initiatives began in schools seeking to strengthen student relationships and well-being, inspired by ideas from cooperative education and emotional education. Researchers such as Helen Cowie and Dawn Sharp were pioneers in systematizing and disseminating these programs throughout the 1980s, establishing the theoretical and practical foundations of peer support in school contexts (Cowie; Sharp, 1996).

In the United States, similar experiences developed from the late 1970s under the framework of *peer counseling*, aimed at promoting mental health, preventing drug use, and strengthening young people’s social and emotional skills. These initiatives later expanded to Canada and Australia, becoming integrated into policies for citizenship education and school well-being, and evolving into important tools for violence prevention and the promotion of positive school coexistence (Cowie, 2000).

The central aims of early PSS included fostering students’ emotional and social well-being; preventing situations of isolation, emotional suffering, and bullying; promoting youth protagonism; and building a culture of care and solidarity within schools. Grounded in the idea that young people themselves can serve as agents of support and transformation, these systems sought to strengthen bonds, develop empathy, encourage active listening, and expand shared responsibility for healthy school coexistence (Holyoak, 2023; Heitmann *et al.*, 2024).

Thus, PSS became internationally recognized as a strategy for mental health promotion and school coexistence, acknowledging that support among peers is a powerful means of developing more welcoming, participatory, and supportive educational communities.

According to Cowie (2000), PSS can be classified into three major groups, depending on their objectives and modes of implementation in schools. The first group encompasses programs that encourage and cultivate friendship among students, known as *befriending*. These systems focus primarily on preventing social isolation and fostering a welcoming environment that strengthens the sense of belonging and solidarity among peers. Students act as support friends, offering companionship and attentive listening to classmates experiencing loneliness or vulnerability. International examples include the widely adopted “Befriending Scheme” in British schools and the “Peer Buddy Program,” commonly found in U.S. schools oriented toward social inclusion. The second group consists of programs focused on guidance,

counseling, and emotional support among peers, known as *peer counselling* or *peer support*. In these systems, students are trained to assist classmates facing emotional difficulties, interpersonal conflicts, or experiences of bullying, thereby promoting a supportive and trustworthy environment. Examples include the “Peer Counselling in Schools” program (Cowie; Sharp, 1996) and the “Peer Support Programme,” which has been disseminated in countries such as Australia and New Zealand. Finally, the third group includes programs dedicated to conflict mediation, in which students are trained to act as mediators in situations involving disagreements or offenses. These programs are based on principles of nonviolent communication, negotiation, and peaceful conflict resolution, with examples such as the “Peer Mediation Programme” (United States) and the “Mediators Programme” (United Kingdom).

The Brazilian PSS: Help Teams and the validation of the model

One of the PSSs implemented in Brazil beginning in 2015 was the Help Teams model, originally created and systematized in Spain by Professor José María Martínez Avilés (2006). However, the Brazilian context required adaptations to this model, both structurally and methodologically. Due to the large scale of Brazilian schools—characterized by high numbers of students and classes, as well as a fragmented school organization with numerous daily lessons and limited time allocated to coexistence projects—it became unfeasible to implement multiple distinct support programs, as is done in Spain, where befriending, peer support, and peer mediation can operate independently. Consequently, it became necessary to consolidate, within a single operational model, the characteristics and functions of the first two groups described by Cowie (2000): fostering bonds and welcoming peers (befriending) and providing emotional support and bullying prevention (peer support).

Furthermore, unlike Spain, Brazil lacks consolidated public policies on school coexistence, which results in structural and training-related deficiencies predating the implementation of PSSs. Added to this is the precariousness of teacher training in this field, since teacher-education programs generally do not include content on coexistence, peacebuilding, or school mediation. This gap hinders the consolidation of peer support programs and requires that teacher and student training be developed in a contextualized and significantly slower manner than in Spain.

Another important point of adaptation concerns training methodologies. Given a school culture often marked by lecture-based classes with limited student participation, it became necessary to propose more dynamic, interactive, and experiential training sessions capable of

fostering student engagement and protagonism. Thus, Brazilian Help Teams incorporated methodologies such as group dynamics, cooperative games, dramatizations, and dialogue circles, making the process more meaningful and aligned with young people's realities.

All these structural, methodological, and training adaptations gradually distanced the Brazilian model from its Spanish precursor, while preserving its core purpose: to create spaces of support, solidarity, listening, and shared responsibility among students, promoting mutual care and a collective commitment to ethical and peaceful coexistence.

Even with these adaptations, the Brazilian Help Teams model was designed from the outset to be supported by metrics and empirical evidence capable of monitoring its effects on school climate. In the first implementation phase—carried out in pilot schools—research already indicated positive outcomes in reducing cases of systematic intimidation. In the initial study we conducted (Tognetta; Souza; Lapa, 2019), we observed a significant decrease in students' self-reported perception of bullying in a school with a Help Team. Among other findings, the first pieces of evidence showed that the model not only contributed to violence prevention but also strengthened social bonds and a culture of solidarity within the school environment.

Still within the first implementation phase, Lapa's (2019) research demonstrated that when comparing schools with and without Help Teams, there was an immediate and significant difference: fewer victims, perpetrators, and bystanders involved in bullying situations were reported by students in schools where the PSS had been implemented.

Likewise, Bomfim (2019) showed that students who participated in Help Teams—and even those who did not, but attended schools with Help Teams—exhibited greater adherence to moral values such as respect, solidarity, and justice when compared to students in schools without this type of PSS. Other studies also yielded important data on the achievements associated with the Help Teams, confirming that the objectives of improving school coexistence were being met (Nadai, 2019). However, another investigation conducted in the Brazilian context (Souza; Tognetta, 2022), which analyzed students' beliefs in their self-efficacy to help—that is, the extent to which they perceive themselves as capable of intervening positively in situations of peer suffering or conflict—raised the first alert regarding our model. The findings showed no significant differences between students in schools with Help Teams and those in schools that had not yet implemented the system.

This result revealed a critical issue: although the Peer Support System had proven effective in reducing bullying and strengthening social bonds, it had not succeeded in fostering a broader culture of collective belief in the capacity to help. In other words, the work of the

Help Teams had not yet mobilized the entire school community to recognize themselves as active agents of care and solidarity. From a theoretical standpoint, this suggests that the mere presence of a trained group of student helpers does not guarantee the internalization of prosocial values and beliefs across the school. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy beliefs are built through direct and repeated experiences of successful action, accompanied by social recognition and positive role models.

Therefore, for the Peer Support System to generate a deeper impact, helping practices would need to become part of the institutional culture rather than a set of actions restricted to a small group. These findings prompted reflection on the need to broaden the formative reach of the Help Teams¹, engaging the entire school community in continuous processes of ethical education, coexistence practices, and shared responsibility. This required training students as helping agents capable of creating experiences, dialogue spaces, and everyday practices through which everyone could experience the value and power of helping others. Small modifications and adaptations were again introduced to the model—still under construction—to validate the actions to be carried out by the Help Teams, including both punctual care initiatives and actions strategically designed to advance the collective goal of promoting the common good and sharing meaningful experiences in school life.

In the second phase of investigations conducted to validate the Brazilian PSS, a series of comparative studies between the Brazilian and Spanish models was undertaken.

This phase included comparative research involving students and teachers from Help Teams schools in Brazil and Spain, as well as from schools without Help Teams in both countries (Tognetta *et al.*, 2020). The results showed that, in the Brazilian context, both students and teachers from schools with Help Teams demonstrated more positive outcomes in areas such as forming friendships, relating well to others, and experiencing less loneliness—results similar to the Spanish findings. However, when comparing Brazilian responses with Spanish ones—even those from schools without Help Teams—the Spanish results were consistently superior. The explanations were straightforward: in Spain, coexistence policies have been in place for more than 20 years. Spanish schools benefit from ongoing professional development and a curriculum that integrates planned, systematized, and intentional work on coexistence. In Brazil, by contrast, Help Teams in 2019—when the comparative studies were conducted—were

¹ We reviewed the methodology of EA training and performance: how many members there are, team entry and turnover, so that everyone had a chance to participate. This discussion, which has been central over the years, had to be adapted in Brazil due to the specific characteristics of our schools in relation to those in Spain.

still in an early phase of development, representing a handcrafted initiative present only in a limited number of schools, unlike the scenario across the Atlantic.

For this reason, in the third phase of work undertaken in Brazil, we organized—together with students and tutors from pioneering schools—public, accessible, and free materials enabling any school to access and implement a Help Team². That same year, we created the Brazilian Network of Help Team Schools, which at the time included public and private schools from various regions of the country, such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, the Federal District, and Minas Gerais.

In 2025, the model entered yet another phase. The current period has been particularly challenging for adolescents. Schools—which should function as spaces for coexistence, discovery, and support—have revealed a troubling landscape: increasing emotional distress, experiences of isolation, cases of bullying, and silent forms of violence that weaken relational bonds among young people. More than ever, boys and girls express anguish, anxiety, and sadness—feelings that often translate into disengagement from learning and participation in school life.

A critical aspect of this context is the lack of belonging. As Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue, belonging is a fundamental human psychological need: people seek stable, secure, and mutually accepting relationships. Feeling a sense of belonging means being recognized as someone who matters—someone with value who is genuinely seen by others. When adolescents do not feel part of a group, they experience isolation, silence, and often suffering. Conversely, when they perceive themselves as integrated and valued, they become more capable of trusting, cooperating, and developing prosocial behaviors, which strengthens coexistence and the school community as a whole.

Another worrisome phenomenon that has intensified is the erosion of hope. Many adolescents struggle to envision a feasible future or believe in their own capacity for transformation. This hopelessness undermines motivation and life purpose, affecting learning processes and interpersonal relationships.

In this context, it became necessary to revisit practices and investigate whether youth protagonism initiatives remained effective in responding to the new realities experienced within schools. The Help Teams—created as a structured form of youth protagonism—had, since their implementation in Brazil, produced significant results in coexistence and values. As noted,

² This work was funded by the Itaú Social Foundation and the Carlos Chagas Foundation and is publicly available at: <https://www.somoscontraobullying.com.br/como-fazer-parte>. Accessed on: Nov. 24, 2025.

earlier studies showed that schools with Help Teams had lower rates of bullying and that their students demonstrated stronger moral values, empathy, and friendships (Bomfim, 2019; Nadai, 2019; Lapa, 2019; Souza; Tognetta, 2022; Tognetta; Souza; Lapa, 2019). These findings indicated that youth protagonism, when oriented toward care and responsibility for others, strengthened a culture of peace and solidarity in schools.

However, the post-pandemic world has introduced new challenges. The return to in-person classes revealed students who were more emotionally vulnerable, with weakened relational skills and reduced affective expression, while schools became overburdened with multiple social and pedagogical demands. Given this scenario, it became essential to understand how the actions of the Help Teams were developing and whether this model of youth protagonism continued to meet the emotional and relational needs of young people.

Thus, we recognized that it was time to listen once again to students and schools, examining how the model responded to feelings of belonging and hope, as well as to issues of emotional distress, bullying, and prejudice—factors that are essential for ensuring that schools function as spaces of protection, connection, and meaning for new generations.

Methodology

The research that led to the revision of the Brazilian model

Between 2022 and 2026, we conducted a set of investigations addressing these themes. Among the core objectives was examining the presence of the *Equipes de Ajuda*—operating as a mechanism to confront current challenges—and assessing their capacity to sustain the feelings that have become critical for adolescents today. The study was carried out in 2024 with 3,276 adolescents enrolled in the 7th, 8th, and 9th grades of public and private lower secondary schools. It sought to respond to multiple research questions embedded in broader inquiries, such as Bomfim's (2025) analyses on belonging, bullying, and youth protagonism; Oliveira's (2025) research on belonging and emotional distress; Maciel's (2025) study on emotional distress and hope; ongoing research by Lahr (2025) focusing on the relationship between these constructs and disability; and Pessoa's (2025) investigation of modern racism. All investigations were exploratory, descriptive, comparative, and quantitative—except for the study on hope, which employed a qualitative approach as well. These designs were adopted to integrate different analytical aims and yield a broad and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The exploratory dimension enabled initial familiarity with the problem and identification of relevant

variables; the descriptive dimension characterized patterns, perceptions, and behaviors as they manifested; and the comparative dimension contrasted groups, contexts, or conditions to identify significant differences and similarities. By integrating quantitative data—scales, questionnaires, statistical analyses—and qualitative data—interviews with content analysis—the studies captured both the objective and subjective dimensions of the phenomenon, producing more comprehensive and contextualized results, as argued by Gil (2008) and Lakatos and Marconi (2003).

The data of particular relevance here concern the following research problem: when comparing schools with and without a PSS implemented—specifically, the *Equipes de Ajuda*—will there be differences in adolescents' responses regarding involvement in bullying, emotional distress, forms of prejudice, sense of belonging, and sense of hope? The analysis presented below focuses exclusively on the comparative results between schools with and without Help Team³.

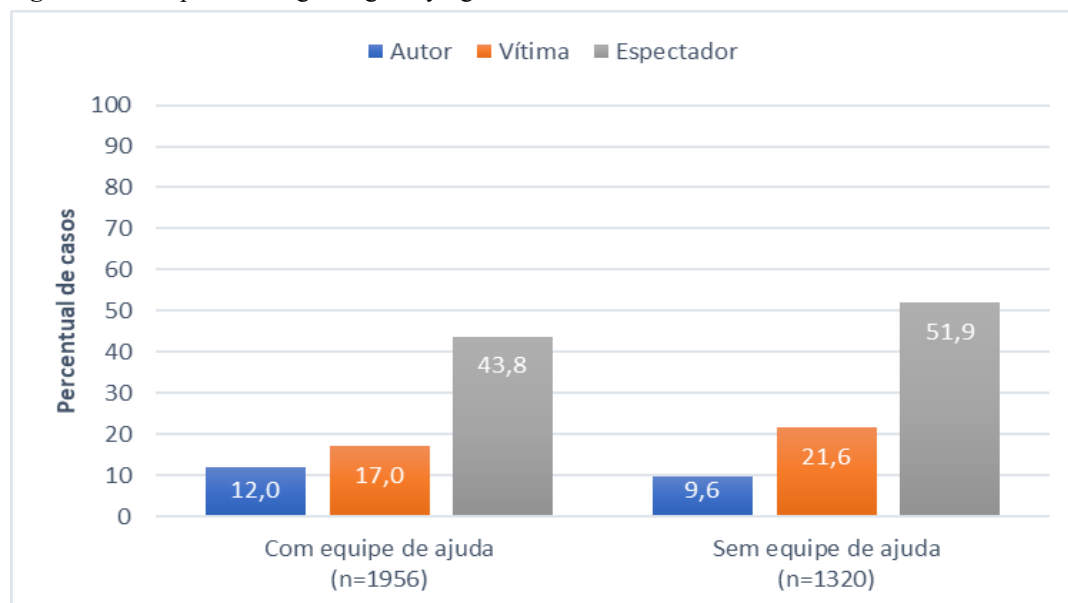
Comparisons between schools with and without Help Team

a) Involvement in bullying situations:

Bomfim's (2025) findings indicate that, when comparing schools with and without a PSS, the prevalence of victims is 21% lower in schools where the program is implemented $(1 - 0.79) * 100$. Similarly, the prevalence of bystanders is 16% lower. The only unexpected result concerns the authorship of bullying: schools with the program showed a higher frequency of students who self-identified as perpetrators (11.86%) than as non-perpetrators (9.62%). Figure 1 presents these results.

³ The reader can find the scales and the validation and description process of the constructs used for the research in the investigations cited above.

Figure 1 – Comparisons regarding bullying between schools with and without a PSS



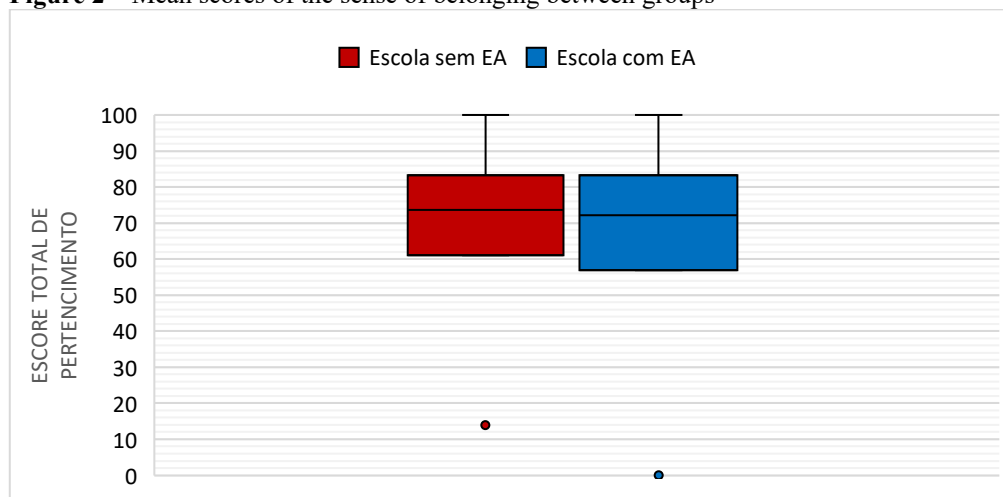
Source: Bomfim (2025).

Regarding students who witness intimidation, 19.6% act as reinforcing bystanders, 34.98% as passive bystanders, and 44.33% as defending bystanders in schools with a PSS. However, in schools without a PSS, the expected pattern—fewer defending bystanders and more reinforcing bystanders—did not occur: 49.06% were defending bystanders, and 16.58% were reinforcing bystanders. Notably, within schools that implemented the PSS, the number of defending bystanders still exceeded that of passive and reinforcing bystanders, a pattern also found in schools without the model.

b) Sense of belonging:

Also, based on Bomfim (2025), the results concerning belonging revealed an important insight. When calculating a single overall belonging factor—by summing all item loadings from the instrument—and comparing the means of schools with and without a PSS, the first group scored 68.78 points, while the second scored 71.33 points. This difference is statistically significant, demonstrating that, contrary to initial expectations, students in schools without a PSS reported a stronger sense of belonging than those in schools where the system was implemented. The same pattern emerged when comparing belonging across the four factors identified through factor analysis, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Mean scores of the sense of belonging between groups

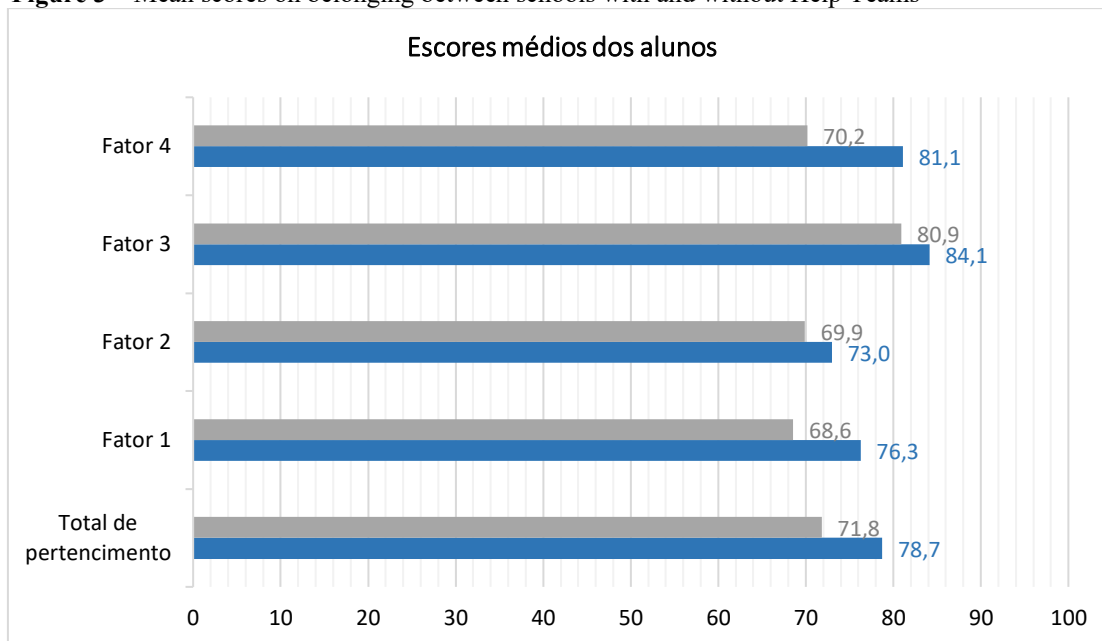


Source: Bomfim (2025).

This finding prompted a relevant reflection on how to understand and interpret this type of result, which cannot be read in a simplistic or linear manner. We suggest that one hypothesis to explain this phenomenon is that belonging is a collective, contextual, and relational sentiment, closely aligned with the notion of school climate. It is not a variable measured solely by the sum of individual perceptions, but rather something constructed and experienced within each school—its culture, its relationships, and its history. To ensure comparability, belonging cannot necessarily be treated as a general average or as the isolated product of a program, because it emerges from everyday interactions, management practices, forms of coexistence, and the circulation of trust among members of a given school community.

For this reason, we adopted an additional analytical approach. We extracted two random datasets from our database: one from a school with Help Teams and another from a school without Help Teams. We then compared the mean scores of the four factors of belonging, and, even when considering all student responses aggregated into a single factor, we sought to ensure that we were attempting to capture belonging from the place where it effectively emerges. Figure 3 below presents the findings of this comparison.

Figure 3 – Mean scores on belonging between schools with and without Help Teams



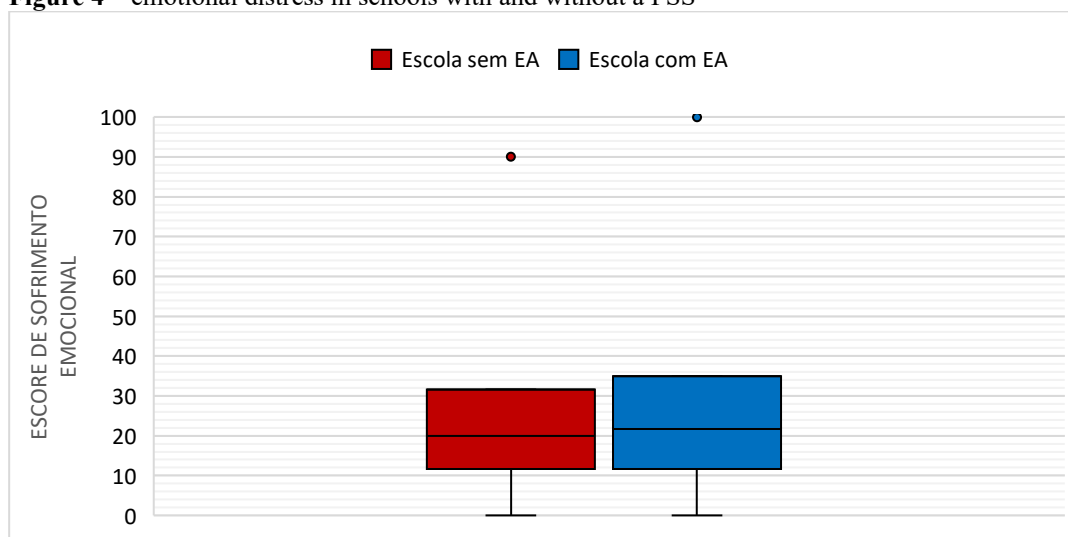
Source: Bomfim (2025).

The results indicate that, across all factors, the sense of belonging is higher among students in schools with a PSS (blue bar) than among students in schools without a PSS (brown bar).

c) Regarding emotional distress

When comparing the results on emotional distress (Oliveira, 2025) between schools with and without a PSS, we also observed a striking outcome. The mean scores of emotional distress among students in schools without a PSS were lower (23.4%) than among students in schools with a PSS (25.44%); this difference is statistically significant. This means that, even with a Support System implemented, situations such as exclusion, loneliness, persistent sadness, anxiety, fear, and emotional abandonment are more present—or more perceived—than among those who do not have a PSS in their school. Figure 4 below presents this comparison.

Figure 4 – emotional distress in schools with and without a PSS



Source: Oliveira (2025).

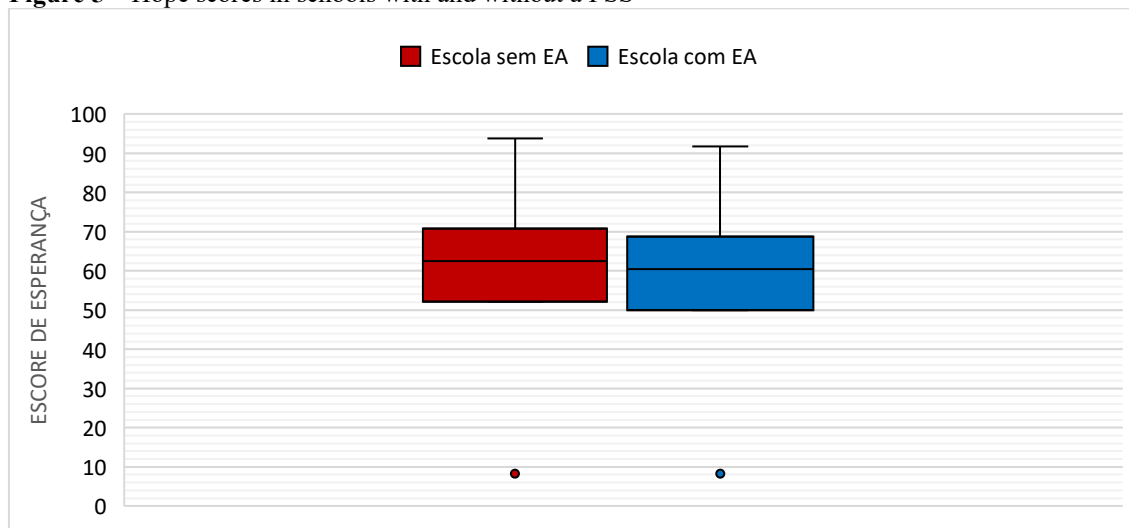
One hypothesis for this result is that when a school implements a PSS—such as the Help Teams—students may begin to reflect upon and perceive situations of exclusion, loneliness, and suffering with greater clarity, whereas these issues were previously invisible. This heightened critical awareness may lead students to evaluate the school environment more realistically, which may translate into higher indices of visible problems in questionnaires, not because such problems did not previously exist, but precisely because they now have space to be expressed, and thus become more lucidly perceived.

On the other hand, these results reveal something urgent: on a scale from 0 to 100—where 100 indicates extremely high emotional distress—it was students from schools with a PSS who reported experiencing such situations at this moment. We now move to another finding which, when taken together with this one, leads us to a profound reflection on the need to revise the model currently adopted in Brazil.

d) Regarding the sense of hope

Similar to previous results, when comparing the two groups in relation to the hope scale (Maciel, 2025), the outcomes were as follows: in schools with a PSS, students scored an average of 58.86 points on the hope scale. Meanwhile, students in schools without a PSS scored an average of 61.28 points, and this difference was statistically significant, as shown in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5 – Hope scores in schools with and without a PSS



Source: Maciel (2025).

These results indicate that students in schools with Help Teams report feeling less prepared, more exhausted, and more defeated when thinking about the future, which appears to be a significant concern in the current context.

The sense of hope is a vital force during adolescence; it is what enables young people to project themselves into the future, to believe that their lives can hold meaning, and that their actions are capable of transforming their own reality. To have hope is not merely to wait for something to happen: it is to believe in the possibility of acting, of being the author of one's own story, even in the face of uncertainty and adversity.

e) *On modern racism*

Modern racism is a subtle, indirect, and concealed form of racial prejudice that manifests in contemporary societies, particularly in those that claim to value equality and reject racism. Unlike traditional or biological racism, which was based on openly hierarchical ideas—such as the belief in the superiority of one racial group over another—modern racism operates symbolically and implicitly. It appears in attitudes, institutions, and seemingly neutral discourses that, in practice, sustain racial inequalities and privileges.

This concept was initially developed by McConahay (1986), who observed that after the achievements of the civil rights movement in the United States, racial prejudice did not disappear, but rather changed its form. People began to avoid openly racist expressions, yet continued to demonstrate resistance to policies aimed at reparations and real equality.

These forms of racism are symptoms of a society that denies its own inequality. By adopting a discourse of neutrality and merit, modern racism conceals the historical conditions that place Black people at a disadvantage, transforming a structural problem into an individual issue.

In the Brazilian context, authors such as Munanga (2005), Gomes (2017), and Carneiro (2003) demonstrate that modern racism functions as a structural and institutional dimension that silently shapes social relations, access to opportunities, and the very construction of identity. This denial of racism produces what Gomes (2017) calls a “pedagogy of absence”: Brazilian schools often omit Black history, culture, and voices from their curricula and practices, reinforcing the idea that whiteness is the universal standard. This daily invisibilization is one of the most effective forms of reproducing modern racism.

In schools, modern racism appears when teachers hold lower expectations for the performance of Black students, when Black voices are seldom heard, or when white aesthetics continue to be valued as synonymous with beauty and success. These are silent forms of exclusion that, over time, generate distancing, suffering, and a diminished sense of belonging among Black youth.

Thus, understanding modern racism means acknowledging that racism has not disappeared—it has merely become more sophisticated. It is no longer only a discourse of hatred; it has become a normalized structure of exclusion sustained by omissions, silences, and inequalities disguised as neutrality. For this reason, we used a modern racism scale to identify the subtle forms of racism among our students.

The results show that among students in schools with a PSS implemented, the mean racism score was lower compared to students in schools without a PSS, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Total racism score in schools with and without PSS

Total Racism Score	School with PSS	School without PSS	<0,01
Mean (SD)	23,59 (17,73)	28,24 (16,68)	
Median (Min–Max)	20 (0-100)	27,5 (0-95)	

Source: The authors.

The need for a sense of community in school life

Recent research on emotional distress, belonging, and hope among adolescents indicates that problems related to social interactions in schools are no longer the same as they were a few years ago. Today, there is a significant increase in feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and lack of motivation among young people, reflecting a deeper malaise that transcends the school environment and affects the very experience of being an adolescent in the contemporary world. The loss of a sense of belonging and the difficulty in envisioning a future are central dimensions of human development, and our investigations have highlighted this unfortunate reality.

What we have seen thus far is that the work carried out with PSS teams in Brazil has demonstrated the extent to which collective actions can positively impact the school environment. The research conducted indicates that PSS teams contribute to reducing problems related to violence—particularly bullying and exclusion—directly supporting values such as respect, solidarity, and justice. In doing so, the program has fulfilled its role of validating the quality of school coexistence as an ethical commitment. However, the current context imposes new challenges. We live in times in which loneliness has been described as “the epidemic of the century,” according to international studies (Naito *et al.*, 2023; Murthy, 2023), which warn of the devastating effects of social isolation on mental and emotional health, especially among young people. This loneliness is not only individual but collective: it manifests in the difficulty to trust, to connect, and to feel part of a community. The results presented in our investigations reveal that even with PSS teams, our adolescents continue to suffer from loneliness, exclusion, anxiety, depression, and lack of hope.

The challenge posed to the work with youth protagonism in schools, in light of these findings, was therefore to expand its scope: to continue promoting respect and justice, but also to nurture the collective sense of belonging and hope, and to address the emotional suffering that directly affects young people.

The research results point to the urgent need to restore the sense of community in schools. Community is more than a group of people sharing the same physical space: it is a set of relationships sustained by emotional bonds, cooperation, care, and shared responsibility. To work in community is to learn that the well-being of one depends on the well-being of all; it is to rebuild trust and the sense of “us” that contemporary society—marked by competition and individualization—has eroded. For bell hooks (2000, 2003), the idea of community is deeply rooted in an ethic of care, love, and solidarity. In works such as *All About Love: New Visions* (2000) and *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003), the author argues that

community is not merely a group of people who coexist in the same space, but a way of being with others grounded in values of mutual care, shared responsibility, and a commitment to collective growth.

For hooks (2003), living in community is simultaneously a political and affective act. It means resisting the individualistic and competitive logic that fragments human relationships and rebuilding spaces of belonging, where each person recognizes themselves as an essential part of a collective whole. In this sense, community is the place where love becomes action—a space in which care is not an isolated gesture, but a daily, collective practice that gives meaning to life.

It was from this deep understanding of community that the Moral Education Studies and Research Group (GEPEM) developed a new and fully Brazilian form of youth protagonism: the *Communities of Care and Support* (CCS). This proposal emerges from the accumulated experience with the *Help Teams*, recognized for their effectiveness in reducing exclusionary behaviors and bullying, as well as for their ethical and supportive engagement in schools.

However, given the social and emotional dynamics of the present—marked by loneliness, loss of belonging, and a crisis of meaning among adolescents—it became necessary to broaden the scope of action.

Communities of Care and Support maintain the original purpose of the Help Teams—intervening in coexistence problems that only students are able to perceive—but now do so in a more comprehensive and integrated way, promoting joint actions with other students to foster a more humane and supportive school climate. This expansion is also reflected in how participants are welcomed: in the Communities, new members are included not only based on the trust they inspire, but primarily on their willingness to act on behalf of the collective, to contribute to shared well-being, and to strengthen the bonds that sustain the school as a living community. They thus become dynamic spaces in which adolescents can relearn how to trust, recognize the value of their own voices, and discover that caring for others is also a way of caring for themselves and for hope.

In this regard, a *Community of Care and Support* (CCS) can be understood as a collaboratively organized group of students who recognize themselves and act based on shared values—cooperation, respect, and solidarity—taking joint responsibility for the quality of interpersonal relationships and for building an emotionally safe and meaningful school environment.

In a time when loneliness and hopelessness threaten youth, the *Communities of Care and Support* stand as a pedagogical and human response: an invitation for schools to reclaim

their role as spaces of connection, meaning, and future. Within them, young people learn that coexistence is not merely the absence of conflict, but the presence of commitment; that hope is not naïve optimism, but a deliberate, daily choice to believe that it is possible to transform—collectively—the world into a more just and loving place.

Final considerations

We live in a time when many young people carry a sense of emptiness, struggle to find meaning, lose hope, and silently grapple with not feeling they belong anywhere. Emotional distress in schools no longer stems solely from peer conflict, but from a deeper landscape shaped by the uncertainties of the postmodern world, by widespread hopelessness, and by a diffuse suffering that urgently calls for forms of coexistence that move beyond democracy—toward genuinely caring relationships among children and adolescents.

Within this context, the emergence of a new model of youth protagonism becomes essential: the *Communities of Care and Support*. Inspired by the notion of community articulated by bell hooks (2003), these Communities expand the horizon of youth engagement, integrating the ethical commitment of the former Help Teams with a broader movement—cultivating collective care, strengthening the meaning of being together, and rekindling, among young people, the capacity to hope for the future through a distinctly Brazilian framework. It is well known that adopting international programs without proper cultural adaptation is always a risk—and in the field of coexistence and bullying prevention, this risk can become a substantial barrier to social transformation. Each school community carries its own relationship dynamics, cultural rhythms, notions of authority, solidarity, and conflict that cannot simply be imported from other contexts. When this is ignored, there is a danger of implementing solutions that fail to resonate with the everyday lives of children and adolescents, resulting in fragile, inconsistent, or even absent outcomes.

In academic debates, important questions have been raised on this issue. Consider, for example, the KiVa program, a Finnish model internationally recognized. Research conducted in the United Kingdom and Chile has shown that part of the academic discussion questions whether more significant outcomes might have been achieved had deeper cultural adaptation, recognition of local specificities, and systematic engagement with school communities been prioritized. In some of these contexts, implementation did not progress sustainably — and one hypothesis raised by researchers is precisely the difficulty, or even resistance, to adjust the

program in ways that would incorporate values, practices, and forms of coexistence specific to each country. The lesson is clear: no program — no matter how renowned — survives without taking root where it is planted.

For us, in Latin America, this reflection is even more urgent. For centuries, we have dealt with imported models that often disregard our ways of being, our struggles, our strengths, and our traditions. Therefore, decolonizing our educational practices is not merely symbolic: it is an ethical imperative. We are heirs to Indigenous and African histories that cultivate the value of community, care, collectivity, and shared responsibility. Creating support systems that reflect our identity is not only possible: it is necessary, desirable, and aligned with what we do best.

It is time to draw upon our creativity, our unique capacity to hope, our roots, and to build a model of coexistence that reflects who we are — a model that does not simply replicate foreign methodologies, but one that emerges from what is deepest in us: the strength of community. Because transforming coexistence requires cultivating belonging — and that, we know how to do.

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