7 Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

After describing the historical and social context and the development of cooperation and mutual help among students throughout the history of education in El Salvador, I have summed up the results of a recent survey on perceptions and experiences of CL among teachers in different schools. In the most extensive part of this dissertation I have described a comunidad in one of the marginalized municipalities of San Salvador, the situation and perspective of its inhabitants, its relationship to the outside and to professionals who to different degrees seem to be insiders and outsiders at the same time. I have described forms of interaction that have a relevance for school life and learning and the diverse perspectives different participants take on these forms of interaction. Finally, I have described how teachers and students perceive small group learning and how this perception partially changed through a more intense implementation of CL. I will now sum up these results while answering the research questions of the study:

To what extent is cooperation or mutual support observable in this context? What experiences with cooperation and mutual support do children and adults have outside of school?

Observations, interviews and conversations showed that there were quite a lot of instances of mutual help or support, especially when it came to practical help for someone in need. This could range from giving money to someone who needed it, for example a classmate who could not buy lunch, or a member of the comunidad who had just lost a relative and needed financial support for the burial. However, it could also go so far as to take in a child whose parents could not take care of him or her for whichever reason. In this case, it implied taking responsibility for a longer period of time.

Instances of cooperation for a mutual goal were fewer than those of spontaneous help in the face of a need. However, they did take place sometimes when the goal was transparent and attractive, when there was a critical situation that demanded action, and when the leadership was adequate and trustworthy.

There were different motives both for helping and for working together. In the case of working together, some were more practical, such as being able to share resources and complementing each other. There were also social motives such as existing or desired relationships or companionship in general. Some motives included social and practical aspects such as protecting each other or sharing a common goal. However, there were also motives connected to convictions about humanity such as believing in cooperation as a basic human trait and as something that helps us develop as humans.
Motives for help were more permeated by transcendent aspects. People chose to help because of existing or desired relationships, because they felt an inner impulse to do so (such as empathy or pity), believed it to be a relevant value or an element of their identity, and because they were aware that they shared vulnerability and the need for help with others. Most of these answers already have a transcendent aspect beyond the immediate situation or relationship. However, some answers even included explicitly spiritual aspects such as retribution from God or fate. Obviously, the impulse to help has to do with a perception of connectedness to other people and their fate and of accountability to God as to how one deals with the vulnerability of others.

Both the motives for and the experiences and perceptions of joint work and mutual help contained aspects of the definitions of solidarity that participants gave. Solidarity was understood as identifying with each other and being united, striving for mutual goals, being tolerant with each other, taking care of each other and helping each other and those in need. However, the perceptions of the prevalence of solidarity in the comunidad varied in the setting. Although many saw the comunidad as more solidary than other neighborhoods and believed that solidarity was shown when there was a perceived need or a threat from the outside, others bemoaned the lack of solidarity and unity and the fact that some people in difficult situations were left alone.

These laments were accompanied with accounts of aggression, exclusion, and competition, forms of interaction that seemed to blatantly contrast cooperation and mutual help or at least restricted them to a very small circle of relations. Another aspect of interaction that was not explicitly described in the data but was confirmed by teachers and co-workers of the NGO when I presented them with it after the analysis of data, is that of distancing. It is related to exclusion but is less an aspect of the struggle for dominance and more a strategy of self-preservation. It could have to do with avoiding problems or threats which this person or his or her associations brought with them; avoiding people who displayed feelings of envy or superiority; distancing oneself from those who were perceived as having brought peril upon themselves by wrong behavior and therefore did not deserve help; distancing oneself from those who seemed beyond help, when it was clear that they would need more help than could be given and that they might not be in a position to make good use of it. So distancing had to do both with social sanctions and with a self-protection against assaults on one’s identity, resources or safety.

The interviews and conversations with the children showed how much they long for more displays of solidarity, cooperation, and help; the excitement they feel about instances in which these forms of interaction are shown; the weariness they have as to how quickly such an interaction can turn sour, and at the same time a