

Developing an inclusive democratic classroom “in action” through cooperative learning

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Abstract

This paper examines how Cooperative learning (CL) and democracy can be examined in relation to one another. CL supports a social constructivist view of students learning together to form knowledge through direct interaction. The overriding benefits of CL are that it is an effective strategy for maximising both social and academic learning outcomes of all, because it focuses on developing positive relationships between students, improving their social skills. This promotes positive social and emotional development and lays the foundations for wellbeing and good mental health. It is precisely this inclusive pedagogy that encourages a democratic classroom environment and a resultant pedagogy that ensures all students’ learning will be considered. A democratic society needs students who are respectful and have a sense of justice so teachers who use this pedagogy help to promote such students. This study clarified the relationship between components of CL and the development of a democratic classroom, particularly the notion of inclusive practice for all which is developed through CL. It also examines how one teacher developed an inclusive democratic classroom “in action” through cooperative learning. It explores Jill’s understandings of CL and how these relate to the development of her inclusive democratic classroom and to her developing a democracy stance. Her reflective diary, interview comments, action plans and classroom observations are analysed in this case study approach to demonstrate how her ‘stance’ was strengthened and how she developed a tolerant, respectful and inclusive classroom culture. Teachers, like Jill who develop this stance can build this democratic class culture and ensure all students are included

Introduction

Cooperative learning is a strategy that considers both students’ academic and social outcomes. It develops positive relationships and helps to manage conflict so cooperative classrooms are likely to be more harmonious and democratic. The democracy stance and affective approach to CL are crucial to building such a democratic class culture. This paper will firstly examine the CL pedagogy, and then examine how this relates to the development of such a classroom. One beginner teacher’s practices in a CL intervention will be examined to consider how she became more democratic in her classroom interactions and how her ‘democracy stance’ developed. Jill was one of six primary school teacher participants in the study who agreed to implement CL in her classroom with support from myself as a researcher with professional learning sessions about action research and cooperative learning. Over the period of intervention there were numerous references both in classroom observations and in interview and reflective comments which suggested that as she embarked on her cooperative learning journey this stance was strengthened. The paper considers how the implementation of CL can encourage democratic classroom interactions and how this pedagogy not only supports high social and academic outcomes for students but also encourages justice and respect between class members.

Cooperative Learning

Extensive research evidence suggests CL is an effective strategy for maximising learning outcomes of all students (Gillies, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2000; Slavin, 1995, 1996) as well as social skills development (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1990; Slavin, 1995, 1996; Stevens & Slavin, 1995). CL can help to promote socialisation and learning among students (Cohen, 1994), promote reading and writing achievements in middle school students (Stevens, 2003) as well as develop better classroom results for special needs students (Jenkins, Antil, Wayne, & Vadasy, 2003).

Additionally, CL has been used to prevent social problems (Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000) alleviate bullying (Cowie & Berdondini, 2001) and help students manage conflict (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Green, & Laginski, 1997). Students are more likely to be engaged in higher order thinking (King, Stafferi, & Adelgais, 1998) and pose questions to challenge others’ perspectives (Palinscar & Herrenkohl, 2002) in the CL classroom. Although all students can benefit from CL, there are increased benefits for higher ability students who, by providing high quality explanations, develop their learning with cognitive reorganisation whilst giving elaborated responses and providing explanations when cooperating in learning activities (Terwel, Gillies, Van den Eden, & Hoek, 2001). Low achieving students need opportunities too for higher order thinking activities in order to help them use their minds well (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993).

Indicators of a cooperative classroom

The following table (Table One) shows the *key* elements of cooperative learning required in classrooms for those teachers who wish to advocate cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

Table One

Cooperative Learning Key Elements

<i>Cooperative learning key elements for study based on Johnson and Johnson (1994)</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
<i>Face to face interaction</i>	<i>students working together /interacting as a group, talking and sharing as a team</i>
<i>Common goal</i>	<i>each member of the group is working towards a common goal or outcome, ie there is one task being completed</i>
<i>Individual accountability</i>	<i>each student responsible for learning all parts of the material / task</i> <i>or completing and sharing their own part of a task</i> <i>or having a specific role to fulfil within the task</i>
<i>Positive interdependence</i>	<i>teacher set up of cooperative goal structures to ensure group success when individual goals are met</i> <i>students to develop a sense of ‘group’</i>
<i>Small group skills (social skills)</i>	<i>interpersonal skills training and reflection</i>
<i>Reflective thinking</i>	<i>learners analyse and reflect on group functioning as well as task outcomes</i>

This table demonstrates the key elements of CL used in this study. It is used to link to aspects of a democratic classroom which are explored below.

Cooperative learning and teacher quality

In this study professional sessions were provided to beginning teachers (in their first, second and third year of teaching) to improve their pedagogical skills as a focus on pedagogy can ensure quality student outcomes. It requires considerable teacher skill to set up such learning and therefore CL was selected as the pedagogy that could extend early career teachers repertoire with positive effects. If it is well developed social and academic outcomes that should be developed in students it is necessary to ensure early career teachers do focus on their pedagogy and that we support teachers to be of the highest quality. There is widespread consensus that teaching quality is a critical influence, with individual teachers being the single largest factor that adds value to student learning (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Ingvarson, 2002; Rowe, 2003) and having the most significant impact on student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 1996, 2000; Hattie, 2003; Hill & Rowe, 1998). So assisting teachers, particularly early career teachers, to further develop their teaching skills is important if we are to improve student outcomes (Zbar, 2003).

Teachers have an impact on student learning and they do this more effectively if they concentrate on developing strong relationships. Care, trust and respect need to be developed in student-student and student-teacher relationships (Hattie, 2003; Rowe, 2003) and this occurs when students work cooperatively. Students who work cooperatively need to display respect and personal regard for others whilst working towards achieving their group goal whilst respecting others' opinions and being inclusive by accepting others' ideas. The strong relationships developed in a cooperative classroom will undoubtedly have a positive impact on student learning.

But is there a relationship between such cooperative behaviour and a democratic stance in the classroom? The following section pulls together aspects of a democratic teaching approach before signifiers of a particular teacher's classroom are included.

Indicators of a democratic classroom

Democratic school culture

Democratic classroom interactions include “active engagement of students with their own learning, co-operation, practices of respect, recognition of equal worth and entitlements” (Fearnley-Sander, Moss & Harbon 2001, p.3). Additionally by developing a democratic school culture the civic outcomes of tolerance and participation will more likely be developed than merely teaching content about civics and citizenship (Fearnley-Sander, Moss, & Harbon, 2001).

Dewey's (1937) understanding of the concept of democracy is explained ‘as a way of life’ (p.368). It is this ‘way of life’ in a classroom that needs to be examined to see how democratic it is, and also it is necessary to examine the role of the teacher in this process. Dewey (1938) argues that the development of character is built through our interpersonal relationships and in turn this affects the way we behave in the world. He believed in teachers being agents of change that could help to improve and reshape society founded on democratic values. The classroom can therefore be seen as a microcosm of our wider society (Schul, 2011).

The democracy stance (Vinterek, 2010) is crucial to building a democratic class culture. The following section examined the number of lenses in relation to the development of a democratic class culture and the importance of the democracy stance. Vinterek's (2010) study considers one particular teacher and classroom environment in Sweden and examines how the ‘way of life’ in the classroom could be interpreted as a democratic way of life. She examines 120 hours of classroom observations of this teacher and found “the importance a democracy stance can play in everyday life in a classroom

and how the interaction that comes out of such a stance seems to have a great role to play in teaching about democracy and fostering democratic values” (p.338).

A community of practice

The students in such democratic classrooms become concerned for one another and they “may be helped to build bridges among themselves; attending to a range of human stories, they may be provoked to heal and to transform” (Greene, 1993, p.16). If we consider too Wenger’s indicators for a community of practice which are: “sustained harmonious or conflictual mutual relationships, shared ways of engaging in doing things together and a shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world” (Wenger, 1998, p.136) then this too can add to our understanding of how such a democratic classroom should look.

Inclusive practice

This study centres on the notion of inclusive practice for all. This definition shifts the usual focus of inclusive education being concerned with those who have additional needs, to the needs of all learners in the classroom. Furthermore inclusive classrooms should have teachers who believe in the ability of all their students to achieve and make progress. Teachers in inclusive classrooms should be able to use a variety of grouping strategies rather than simply relying on ability grouping that serves to separate and distinguish the able from the less-able. Such inclusive teachers strive to overcome the professional challenge of how to overcome the difficulties some learners experience. They seek to try out new ways of finding support for their students, work with others in the classroom to show all adults respect the learners as members of a learning community and are committed to professional learning for inclusive practice (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Teachers in inclusive classrooms believe that we can overcome exclusion by using inclusive practices, “Inclusion is seen as a *process* of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities” (UNESCO, 2003, p.7).

Social learning

Many researchers have shown the importance of social learning. If respect, communication and attachment is enhanced between the child and teacher, then children’s attention, brain development and learning follows (Kusche & Greenberg, 2006). These emotional connections to their teachers, as well as to their peers, especially for those who show that they value academic success and learning, help to further develop such values and encourage achievement (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002). Similarly, engagement at school and academic motivation have been shown to be displayed by students who have developed positive and respectful relationships and interactions with their teachers (Ryan & Patrick, 2001), with students performing better academically when they experience this sense of belonging at school (Osterman, 2000).

Methodology

This paper examines the semi structured interviews; professional learning sessions and videoed classroom observations of one primary school teacher of the six primary teacher participants who made a seven month commitment to design and teach at least one CL lesson a week, keep an action research plan and write a reflective diary. All participants were early career teachers in their first, second or third year of teaching. Each teacher had eight classroom observations that were also videoed and were subsequently coded for CL using an observation schedule designed by the researcher. There were also two interviews, one pre and one post study. Throughout the seven month commitment the teacher also wrote a reflective diary. The amount of entries in these diary reflections varied between the six teachers in the study. Three professional learning sessions about action research and cooperative learning occurred during the seven months. These sessions also involved mentoring and

feedback about classroom observations. All six participants’ classroom observations, interviews and reflections were analysed and coded. Emerging themes found from the interviews were synthesised with thematic analysis following the principles of coding associated with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in order to describe the main issues identified by the participants (i.e. descriptive, or open coding) and propose higher order conceptualisation of the main themes which had emerged (i.e. analytic or selective coding). The themes were continually regrouped as the data was further explored using a type of grounded theory (Bazeley, 2007; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011) in order to relate them in a theoretical model related to the democracy stance indicators that emerged from the data. My own role was to become an “educative mentor” during this research journey. Situated in practice, the intention was to help develop the dispositions of early career teachers to become life-long action researchers that would develop powerful teaching and continuous improvement in their teaching careers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

The specific teacher who is the focus for this paper, Jill, was in her third year of teaching. Initial references to the democracy stance in Jill’s initial interview, prior to a period of intervention of professional development in cooperative learning, were examined in relation to comments from her final interview, her reflective diary and action plan entries as well as from classroom observations during CL lessons (total of eight lesson observations throughout the study) during and after this period of intervention.

Findings

The following section explores the relationship between the key indicators of CL and a democratic classroom by examining a classroom in action and the teacher’s observations about what was happening. It was found that each of the indicators or signs of democracy evident in such classrooms were strengthened by the use of CL.

Jill planned classroom activities requiring her students to be engaged in dialogue, consider different perspectives, encourage tolerance and respect and develop interpersonal relationships. The references/comments/ reflections and observations show how she developed relationships in and with her students and how she encouraged risk taking in her classroom. The development of an inclusive classroom culture is apparent in Jill’s classroom; she also endeavoured to promote self-esteem in her students and demonstrated clear trust in their abilities. The following table explores this evidence.

Table Two

Indicators of cooperative learning and democracy stance

<i>Indicators of cooperative learning and indicators of democracy stance</i>	<i>Evidence of signs of democracy in Jill’s classroom prior to intervention (Initial interview)</i>	<i>Evidence of signs of democracy in Jill’s classroom after the period of intervention (Final interview (FI), reflective diary (RD), Classroom observations (CO) and action plan AP)</i>
<i>Positive interdependence and a sense of group</i> <i>Recognition of equal worth</i>	<i>I put them with Kevin and they modified his work down, they came to me and said you know ‘how about we do this’ and it was good. It was a really good group effort.</i>	<i>I do not want any controversy please- if you are the leader in the group does not mean you have all the power- you need to be a fair leader (CO)</i>
<i>Individual accountability</i>	<i>That’s also to keep the students who have the needs or who have</i>	<i>students in mixed ability groups are to be checked and made clear that</i>

Indicators of cooperative learning and indicators of democracy stance	Evidence of signs of democracy in Jill’s classroom prior to intervention (Initial interview)	Evidence of signs of democracy in Jill’s classroom after the period of intervention (Final interview (FI), reflective diary (RD), Classroom observations (CO) and action plan AP)
Respect and tolerance (Vinterek, 2010)	<i>the social problems.. It’s also letting them have on paper the part that they’ve contributed as well. I think that’s really important so that they, when we read the [group] log I can say ‘oh look John’ as much as John may have only contributed a small amount, but for him that was a good thing. So he can have the praise where the praise is due</i>	<i>the work is to be carried out by all members of the group not only the high achievers. Recording of meetings and contributions is a good way of monitoring this (RD)</i>
Positive interdependence and a sense of group Democratic sentiments- open mindedness, decision making with others, taking others’ perspectives (Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003)	<i>I love getting into discussions and I love posing questions... I had an opinion and then the children gave me their point of view that they’d come up with and they changed my way of thinking and then I’d do something and I’ll change their way of thinking and it’s because they have sought out other people’s information</i>	<i>Some can do more than others, however it is strongly reinforced that all contributions are important to the group completing the task with a positive outcome. (RD)</i>
Positive interdependence and a sense of group Democracy stance (Vinterek, 2010) Culture of communication Willingness to listen (Vinterek, 2010)	<i>and I will sort of get the feel of them as well by the look on their face and by their eyes as to whether or not ‘Mrs S I’m feeling comfortable in this or no I’m actually not feeling comfortable in this group</i>	<i>Class discussion after the presentations is important for communication. Students are reminded again on how they can give and take constructive criticism but high importance is placed on it not being a put down (AP).</i>
Positive interdependence and a sense of group Willingness to express thoughts (Vinterek, 2010)	<i>also to give praise where praise is due and to give encouragement and to look at the question that’s been asked, ask them to give me their answer and also try to pose questions to pull them out more information or to guide them to give me, extend on that please, can you expand on that please, where did you get your information.</i>	<i>One of the roles is a ‘noise controller’. This persons job is to ensure all members are on tasks and that the group as a whole are tasks focused and not all talking at once. By doing this there is a lesser chance for behaviour problems because each member is encouraged to be task focused. Also the leader constantly checks on the progress of each member (RD).</i>
Interpersonal skills Improved relationships	<i>if you have a higher self-esteem and you are achieving and you feel good about what you’re doing, you’ll want to do it again and you’ll want to try a different way and that develops the love of</i>	<i>you’ve got to know whether they’re socially going to mix with the group they’re with, whether or not you’ve got, if you haven’t got anybody who’s too overbearing, too overpowering so that the other</i>

Indicators of cooperative learning and indicators of democracy stance	Evidence of signs of democracy in Jill’s classroom prior to intervention (Initial interview)	Evidence of signs of democracy in Jill’s classroom after the period of intervention (Final interview (FI), reflective diary (RD), Classroom observations (CO) and action plan AP)
	<i>learning and that’s I think is very important and you can get that in group work</i>	<i>person isn’t going to have their self-esteem knocked out of them, to me I still say that’s the most important part (FI)</i>
Positive interdependence Individual accountability A classroom of many voices and ears (Vinterek, 2010)	<i>Let’s do this together and let’s talk about this, you need to teach everybody in your group what you’re doing and let’s open this up and I found that that was a very big thing in the group work as far as gluing information and the children working together</i>	<i>Supporting each other. Listening to each other and linking what one knows at this point to what others within the group know also. Being open minded to learn from others in the group and to listen to their point of view (RD)</i>
Positive interdependence and interpersonal relationships A community of practice Shared ways (Wenger, 1998) Pro-social behaviours (Morcom & Cumming-Potvin, 2010)	<i>so they’re also giving each other constructive criticism we call it in our classroom, we call it, and it’s not a ‘put down’ it’s a what could you do to change it, what could you do on the font, the colour, the screen the image, everything together, was the information relevant for the topic we were doing? And I found at the end of the day when we did that I was very happy.</i>	<i>because one day there could be friends in the classroom and then they’re arguing in the playground so I take all that into consideration and what works best and if I change the room the children will often say to me ‘oh can we go back to how we were’ and I’ll say ‘it’s a democracy here, hands up who’d like to have the groups back’ majority, ok then five minutes of our lesson let’s get our room back how everybody feels comfortable in and then we’ll begin the lesson and I find that five minutes of our time is beneficial to my teaching and their learning as well (FI).</i>
Sense of group Individual accountability Inclusive practice Learners trusted to make good decisions about learning (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011)	<i>with the group work they need to have a variety, it has to be a variety, for them to really put their...to give them the choice ...to get their strengths.</i>	<i>What I wanted to do was balance the groups- does anyone have any questions or is not happy about their group? The leader needs to delegate- everybody needs to do something different (CO)</i>
Positive interdependence Social skills Social learning Sense of belonging (Osterman, 2000)	<i>the children need to learn social skills and to feel a sense of belonging</i>	<i>each and every one of you have to say something... how’s your group travelling?... You need to be inclusive and have everybody’s ideas in the planning (CO)</i>

The table above explores the references a teacher has made in her reflective diary comments as well as her final interview comments. It also explores evidence from classroom observations. The following section explores the evidence from this table in relation to the indicators of democracy.

A democratic school culture

A democratic school culture is developed through active engagement and through the recognition of equal worth. If students are able to keep an open mind and see the points of view of others then they are more likely to respond to diversity and difference and foster civic and social engagement. Students who work in cooperation are more likely to be involved in negotiation, need to resolve conflict as they work within different contexts. They are more likely to respond to diversity and difference as they are required to actively listen to others and consider each other's feelings (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006). Jill's comments demonstrate this and also how this relates to the CL elements of positive interdependence and a sense of group.

There are obvious links of cooperative learning classrooms with democratic classrooms. For a start, this willingness to listen is certainly promoted in the cooperative classroom. Cooperative learning requires students to listen to each other whilst they work in cooperation on their individual tasks or whilst participating in their allocated cooperative role (individual accountability). When completing their own task and needing to explain this to others who listen and respond also helps develop this sense of a group as they also become positively interdependent when trying to complete the common goal using their own individual contributions. The willingness to express their thoughts is also paramount in this process and in doing so students are encouraged to share their perspectives whilst engaging in this dialogue. This sharing of perspectives is necessary as students are asked to complete a common goal in a CL task and through face to face interaction 'a classroom of many voices and ears' (Vinterek, 2010) is promoted. It is the 'deliberate dialogues' and the promotion of certain attitudes or ways of looking at the world (a democracy stance) that help to positively influence the students to learn about democracy (Vinterek, 2010). In a cooperative classroom, teachers strive to encourage students to form their own opinions but also acknowledge that others may hold different standpoints. This is possible, as students are encouraged in such classrooms to share their different views, due to their individual accountability, and in order to complete the common goal that they are striving to complete work together make choices due to their positive interdependence.

Talking is promoted as much as listening in CL classrooms. Risk taking is encouraged and trust in the ability of oneself is promoted (Ekman, 2007) as students complete their own parts of the task and reflect on their contributions throughout and at the culmination of the activity. Vinterek (2010) argues that it is this "culture of communication" that fosters such an environment that reflects "democratic principles in action" (Ochoa-Becker et al. 2007, p.211, as cited in Vinterek, 2010, p.370). A classroom of many voices and ears is developed in a classroom where teachers believe in the democratic ideals of equality, freedom and justice and where students take responsibility for their actions. For students to willingly express their thoughts and willingly listen they need to have developed strong relationships with their peers and their teacher in order to take risks in their classroom and share their ideas. This can only occur within a classroom that has a teacher that has developed such respect from and with their students, and who therefore has developed students who can tolerate others, that this can occur.

A community of practice

The concern for one another that is developed within the cooperative classroom helps to build tolerance and respect, especially as cooperative classrooms build social skills, and encourage the reflection on these skills both during and at the end of the task completion. The shared ways and shared discourse (Wenger, 1998) in a cooperative classroom are developed through face to face interaction, by ensuring students are working towards a common goal and by developing the sense of

group through positive interdependence.

Inclusive practice

There have been a number of claims that cooperative learning has demonstrated positive student outcomes in academic achievement, social behaviour and affective development (Gillies & Ashman, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000; Slavin, 1996) due to its ability to emphasise active interaction amongst diverse groups of students with different abilities and backgrounds (Nelson, Gallagher, & Coleman, 1993). Slavin particularly asserted the affective benefits of cooperative learning such as increased self-esteem and improved relationships amongst diverse students (Slavin, 1987). Cooperative strategies build interpersonal skills and such collaborative skills helps to develop students academically and emotionally (Ferguson-Patrick, 2008). Increased participation occurs in these cooperative classrooms and decreased exclusion also occurs as a result of the development of interpersonal relationships. Teachers respect and are able to respond to human differences in ways that include learners, rather than exclude them in what is available in daily classroom life (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). This is evident in Jill’s classroom. The increased participation of all students and responsibilities they are given to make good choices are evident, for example when she asks her students if they are happy in their group and to delegate responsibilities within the group.

Social learning

Respect and communication is clearly important in Jill’s classroom. For example she asks her students ‘how they are travelling’ and ensures they are including everybody’s ideas in the planning process. The respectful relationships in her classroom are evident between herself and amongst her students indicating too that a focus on social skill development and by promoting positive interdependence, a sense of belonging has been established in her classroom.

Conclusion

Case study research allows the focus on a particular issue in order to understand complex real life situations using multiple sources of evidence. Jill’s classroom is a particularly rich case that allows us to understand more fully how a democratic classroom and a classroom teacher using cooperative learning have synergies. If as a nation we want to build a democratic society that assures justice and respect, it is important to consider not only academic learning outcomes, but also the development of social outcomes in our students. Cooperative learning has been shown as a strategy with a set of principles which promotes both academic and social learning. It has a strong research base developed over decades. This research has found that the use of cooperative learning in classrooms is important because it encompasses learning that engages the students cognitively, socially and emotionally. Additionally, it is an inclusive pedagogy that encourages a democratic classroom environment and a pedagogy that ensures all students’ learning will be considered. This teacher has demonstrated how she has developed such a democratic classroom.

Cooperative learning is a pedagogical strategy that can help to sustain teachers’ enthusiasm early in their careers (Ferguson-Patrick, 2011). This teacher has been able to focus on a strategy that research has shown improves students’ social and academic outcomes. It has allowed her to focus her attention on developing her classroom culture in a way that supports collaboration between students in a collegial environment (Hargreaves, 2003). She has also been able to collaborate with other early career teachers through the professional learning sessions, to support such innovation in practice. The study, with its focus on reflection and action research, has also developed her enthusiasm for ongoing teacher research which hopefully will be sustained throughout her career. It is envisaged that she will be able to continue to develop insights and understandings to improve teaching practice (Elliott, 1991), allowing reflection on practice in context for the rest of her teaching career. Jill has developed her democratic classroom in order to support the development of social and academic outcomes in her

students. She has built confidence in using a pedagogy that supports social justice. If we can support all early career teachers in this endeavour, it will help to promote inclusion as well as communities of practice that encourage the development of democratic classrooms.

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