

Co operative Learning and the Equitable Classroom in a Multicultural Society

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Elizabeth G Cohen

We are gathered together here in Manchester at a time of critical social change in each of our societies. There has been a marked shift in the population makeup of each country sending participants to this conference. Immigration from all parts of the world brings to the schools a young population from very different cultural backgrounds. People of colour are mingling with formerly homogeneous white populations.

As a sociologist I would point out that many of the newcomers are struggling economically. They experience significant discrimination in the host society. They compete for low-level jobs with native labourers who themselves have a high unemployment rate. The poorest of the immigrants often live in segregated, inner city neighbourhoods. I need not tell you that these are the classic ingredients of a period of social conflict and unrest.

As educators we are deeply concerned with the response of teachers and students to this social change. Children will show prejudice, reflecting their parents' anger at a perceived economic threat. When the children reject newcomers, teachers are understandably distressed. However, they are ill-prepared to deal with cultural differences that result in open rejection and hostility. In addition to the introduction of marked cultural differences, newcomers may represent a wide range of academic achievements. Teachers typically do not know how to work with such heterogeneous classes. In particular, they do not know what to do with students who do not speak the language of instruction at all well, or possibly at all.

Co-operative Learning to the Rescue

Co-operative learning is a critical tool in adapting schools to a multicultural, multiracial, and multilingual population. Much classroom research has shown that working in heterogeneous co-operative small groups will increase interracial friendliness and trust (Slavin, 2001). Therefore, co-operative learning and other

school activities involving heterogeneous groups are an important antidote to the tendency for culturally and racially different children to segregate themselves within schools. Co-operative learning is also an antidote to the tendency for schools to divide the children according to academic achievement. Although teachers find that it is easier to work with more academically homogeneous classes, this manoeuvre has the side effect of segregating according to social class. The homogeneously low streams or tracks are invariably composed of students from poorer homes and are more likely to contain children of colour. The newcomers, if they come from homes with relatively little formal education, and if they are not fluent in the language of instruction, are especially likely to be placed in the "low ability" "low achieving" groups or streams. In the US the students whose native language is not English are often segregated in English as a Second Language classes long after they should have been mainstreamed.

It should be obvious that students will only overcome their fears and stereotypes concerning the newcomers if they have a chance to interact with them. Attending the same schools is the first step, but not enough to produce true social integration. Researchers have repeatedly documented that actual contact even within a desegregated school can be quite limited (Schofield, 2001).

In addition to desirable psychosocial outcomes, another major advantage of co-operative learning for the academically heterogeneous, multicultural, multilingual setting is that students can use each other as resources. Students can be taught how to help each other without doing other students' work for them. Fully bilingual students can help the new arrival with translation: they can explain the task assignment; they can translate what is being said in the group; and they can translate back into the language of instruction what the newcomer is saying. This process of explaining to one another and acting as linguistic bridges helps to solve the severe problem of teachers meeting the needs of students in heterogeneous classrooms. Without students acting as resources for one another, it becomes impossible for the teacher to single-handedly adapt the curriculum for the wide range of achievement and proficiency in the language of instruction among the students.

A third advantage of co-operative learning is the well-documented improvement in academic achievement. For example, David and Roger Johnson and their associates (1990) have conducted multiple studies comparing co-operative to competitive and individualistic settings and typically find superior learning gains in co-operative settings. Rachel Lotan and I have repeatedly found

that when students are engaged in a creative open-ended task, the more they talk and work together the more they learn (Cohen & Lotan, 1997). This is more than a matter of students helping one another. When students exchange ideas, comments, and insights they arrive at a much better conceptual understanding and absorb academic content more effectively than when they work alone.

Preparing Students for Co-operation in a Diverse Society

In order to achieve these results of improved intergroup relations, students teaching and helping one another, and improved academic achievement, teachers will need help with preparing the students for productive co-operative learning. Students require special training for the co-operative setting because traditional classrooms are individualistic and competitive. Students must develop whole new ways of caring what happens to others in a group. For example, they must learn that they have the right to ask others for help and the duty to assist those who ask for help. Some experts in co-operative learning recommend special team-building and skill-building exercises (For an introduction to these techniques see Graves, 1994 and Cohen, 1994). Others recommend that groups receive specific feedback on the quality of the group process (Johnson, Johnson, Stanne, & Garibaldi, 1990). Evidence suggests that either of these techniques can be effective.

To prepare students for citizenship in a diverse adult society where they will show a preference for co-operative relations, I would strongly recommend an additional step. In addition to knowing how to work harmoniously in a heterogeneous group, they should understand the importance of co-operation in society. In modern industrial society, children often fail to understand the great strengths that come from co-operation. They do not grasp that people must co-operate for economic and even physical survival. To them, it is not at all obvious that groups are the best way to solve most difficult problems. No one has ever taught them that groups can be the source of conflict resolution. They do not even realise that, as adults, they are very likely to work in teams rather than individually in the workplace.

It is the experience of co-operative groups **plus the intellectual understanding of the role of co-operation in society** that will give students a commitment to the co-operative mode and a preference for working co-operatively rather than competitively or individualistically (Breer & Locke, 1965). Without this understanding, they will not show a preference for co-operative relations in general (Bloom & Schuncke, 1979).

Restructuring the Classroom

In thinking about preparing students for citizenship, co-operative learning is more than a technique that we plug into the standard way of running a classroom. What we do in classrooms will tell both natives and newcomers how we expect them to deal with each other as mature citizens. Classrooms, whether co-operative, individualistic, or competitive, tell students what is considered ideal behaviour in adult society. Teachers usually feel that running the classroom has to do with discipline and management of a number of possibly unruly and unmotivated students. However, research and theory tell us that the kinds of structures that students experience lead to their preferences for those structures in the future. Thus, if children experience a classroom structure that is highly competitive, they will prefer competitive situations in the future, thinking that those are the morally correct conditions. If, in contrast, children experience a co-operative classroom, they will, if given the choice, tend to prefer co-operative modes.

The teachers' evaluations of students, their rewards, and their methods of discipline can all reflect a more co-operative mode. For example, grading on a curve so that, by definition, some will win and some will lose does not fit well in a co-operative classroom. Nor does handing out points for infringements of the rules fit the co-operative model. Nor does public exhibition of some students' work with many gold stars while others never see any of their work on display. In contrast, involving the students in setting rules and in deciding how to solve problems as a group or class is compatible with a co-operative classroom. Also compatible with a co-operative structure is a system of evaluation that looks at multiple dimensions of a child's performance and abilities, so that each child realises favourable evaluation on some aspects of their performance.

Making the Classroom Equitable

Multicultural classrooms should not only be co-operative but should also be *equitable classrooms*. In an equitable classroom, teachers and students view each student as capable of learning both basic skills and high-level concepts. All students have equal access to challenging learning materials; teachers do not deprive certain students of tasks demanding higher-order thinking because they see these students as not "ready;" and classmates readily share instructional materials and give others a chance to use manipulatives. Teachers create opportunities for students

who cannot read or understand the language of instruction to complete activities and to use materials.

A key aspect of equitable classrooms is that the interaction among students is "equal-status." In other words, all students are active and influential participants and their opinions matter to their fellow-students. Finally, despite wide variation in previous academic achievement, the instruction in an equitable classroom does not produce a wide variation in learning outcomes among the students. While the more successful students continue to do well, the less successful students are much more closely clustered around the mean achievement of the classroom rather than trailing far out on the failing end of the distribution. Thus there is a higher mean and a lower variance of achievement scores in a more equitable classroom than in a less equitable classroom.

In an equitable classroom, it is necessary to design co-operative tasks so that different students can contribute different skills and abilities. If tasks are what I call "multiple ability," then those students who are advanced in academic achievement will contribute some but not all the relevant skills. Newcomers will also be able to make important contributions. This calls for broadening the nature of the curriculum so that it includes a much wider range of human intelligence. For example, making up a skit, or creating a model, or introducing a problem of creative, imaginative thinking requires skills and multiple intellectual abilities found in many different students. Those children who are verbally precocious may be quite unable to handle a spatial-visual task. Thus no one student will be superior at all aspects of these multiple ability tasks and every one is likely to show skill at some features of these tasks.

Multiple ability tasks always include traditional academic skills but also include many different ways to understand concepts. This is one way to solve the challenge of inclusion rather than allowing some students to be excluded from academic success. Because there are multiple ways to grasp central concepts, a much larger proportion of students will arrive at a proper understanding of the major concept of each discipline.

Social vs. Intellectual Gains

There is a tradition of viewing co-operative learning primarily as a source of social gains such as friendliness, trust, skills in working with others, and improved intergroup relations. These are indeed *very* important outcomes. However, the very same co-operative learning experiences that prepare students for harmonious

intergroup relations can advance intellectual development and the understanding of concepts. It is a mistake to think of co-operative learning as purely process. It is quite possible to benefit from all the pro-social advantages of the technique at the same time as one teaches difficult concepts and develops higher-order thinking. The latter goal calls for careful construction of rich tasks that permit students to work together, sharing their insights, ideas, and skills, while grappling with challenging abstractions of the various disciplines.

Treating Status Problems within Groups

Because multicultural classrooms are often also academically heterogeneous, there should be special concern with what is happening between more middle class, mainstream students and culturally and racially different students whose parents are struggling economically. The teacher needs to be aware of what is happening within the co-operative learning groups. Are the students who are more advanced academically dominating the small groups? Are they telling everyone else what to do and how to do it? Are they listening to what others have to say? Are the newcomers simply accepting help and not making a contribution? Are they very quiet? When they do speak up, does anyone listen to them? If any of the above issues of dominance and lack of participation is occurring, there is most likely "a status problem" within the group.

When mainstream, middle class students dominate and fail to listen to marginalised newcomers, the status order of the larger society is repeated within the groups. Although the students may be friendly with each other, the stereotypes of the intellectual incompetence of the strangers in the society are reinforced. Those who say very little and those whose opinions are not sought or are ignored will be seen as lacking the ability to make significant contributions. This will occur even though careful observation and listening to the low-status students may reveal that they have relevant and important ideas. Instead of creating a setting for interaction where students learn what newcomers have to offer, the teacher may unwittingly have created a situation in which mainstream students learn that newcomers have very little to offer.

In addition to creating multiple ability tasks such as those described above, it is necessary to intervene and treat these status problems (Cohen, 1994). The key to producing truly equal-status interaction lies in raising the expectations for competence that are

held for low-status students. In classrooms, the most important status dimensions are academic standing and popularity. When newcomers are struggling with the language or lack the repertoire for school success they are very likely to take up low-status positions on the academic status order that develops in classrooms. They may also suffer from social isolation.

There are several ways that teachers can and do intervene to raise expectations for competence. One way is to explain that the group tasks require many different abilities. Of course, this is only possible if the assignments are truly multiple ability tasks. The teacher then clearly states, "No one will be good at all these abilities. Everyone will be good at some of these abilities." This strategy is called the Multiple Ability Treatment. It is effective in changing the expectations for competence for low-status students because they and others in their group (1) change their perceptions of the task and see that it will require much more than traditional school-related skills; (2) believe what the teacher has said about everyone having some of these important skills and abilities that will be necessary for a successful outcome; and (3) believe that even high-status students could not possibly excel at all the skills called for in this task. The result of a successful Multiple Ability Treatment will be greater participation and learning on the part of the low-status student.

A second method of raising expectations for competence is called Assigning Competence to Low-Status students. In this case, teachers observe the groups at work and catch the low-status student when he or she is making an intellectual contribution to the group. They then specifically point out what kind of an intellectual contribution that this student is making. For example, the teacher says, "Look how Jose has figured out to put the tangrams together. He is very logical. He is a important resource for this group." Of course the teacher will only make this comment if it is truly the case that Jose has figured out how the tangrams go together. Notice that the teacher has pointed out that this ability is relevant to the success of the group. This strategy will raise expectations for Jose's competence because the teacher's evaluation is highly believable to students, because the evaluation has occurred publicly, and because the evaluated skills are relevant to the success of the group. In this hypothetical group, Jose will speak up and share what he has discovered about the tangrams. Not only will the group be more successful in completing the group task, but the other students will develop a true appreciation for Jose's competence. (For more details on using these treatments for status problems, see Cohen, 1994).

Development of Group Tasks

In an equitable classroom, academic success for students who are struggling with the language and who do not have the early background that promotes such success lies in the careful design and implementation of group tasks. Group tasks should be challenging and require interaction, reading, writing, and problem solving. When teaching central, abstract concepts of a discipline, it is best if students have more than one group task to help them understand. If one task is spatial and visual, another textual, and still another musical, there will be more than one way for each student to develop a deep understanding.

Accountability

Groups should be held accountable for their performance. Individuals can be held accountable by requiring that they write an individual report upon completion of the group task. Students can receive feedback on their group performance and on their individual reports. Of course, the teacher should make quite clear to the students what constitutes an exemplary group performance before she or he makes public comments evaluating a group's presentation or product (Cohen, Lotan, Abram, Searfoss, & Schultz, in press; Abram et al, 2002).

By building into tasks the basic skills along with other intellectual abilities and by holding groups and individuals accountable for the development of these skills and abilities, it is entirely possible for many more students in a classroom to become academically successful. Not only do all the students have access to challenging curricula, but they have multiple opportunities to learn in different ways, peer resources to assist them, and consistent, specific feedback from the teacher on what they are doing well and where they need to improve. Both basic skills and higher-order thinking can be part and parcel of co-operative learning.

Right now it is fashionable to talk about the goal of "reaching all children" and "leaving no child behind". However, it takes much more than slogans to achieve such a goal in today's classrooms. It is necessary to restructure the classroom and to change the nature of the learning process so that all children have access, not only to routine basic skills, but to higher order thinking. We do not have as much choice to go on teaching in the traditional manner as is commonly believed. If the problem of lag in achievement by so many students is not solved, the blocked social mobility of the

newcomers and other oppressed groups will lead to serious social unrest of the type that is frightening everyone now.

Next Steps in Changing the Classroom

If this sounds like a very big job of social change in the classroom, it is. What should an educator who is at the beginning of the process of adapting instruction and classrooms so that they become more co-operative and equitable do in the face of this challenge? The first thing to do is to join together co-operatively with like-minded colleagues who feel impelled to do something more powerful about educating the next generation for responsible citizenship. A collaborative group can undertake the study of the extensive research and writing on co-operative learning and co-operative classrooms.

I would urge you to move slowly and carefully in attempting to make changes in the mode of instruction. Go step by step with adequate opportunities for observing each other's classrooms and for reflection. Start with trying out some of the recommended skill builders and/or team builders in preparation for co-operative learning. Work together to create or adapt some group tasks that centre on important concepts in the curriculum. Try them out, critique them, and keep notes on how to revise them. The stance of the staff developer and teacher should be both self-evaluative and self-critical: Take advantage of the extensive research that has been carried out on co-operative learning and its implementation. Take advantage of the curricula that have been developed specifically for co-operative learning. It is a challenging method of teaching and should not be undertaken unless one is willing to experiment and problem-solve together.

You are fortunate in that there are many educators and researchers who have travelled this road seeking greater social justice in classrooms before you. I believe that it is only through travelling this road together that we will help to produce citizens able to function in new and different kind of pluralistic society.

Elizabeth G Cohen is Professor Emerita of the School of Education and Department of Sociology at Stanford University, California.

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