

# Learning Co-operatively under Challenging Circumstances: Ethnography of Co-operation Among Pupils in a High-Risk School in the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador

Christine Schmalenbach

This paper reports on an on-going study of co-operation at a school in a high-risk context in the metropolitan area of San Salvador, the capital of the Central American nation of El Salvador. The study takes an ethnographic approach and focuses mainly on the relation between culture, contextual factors and collaboration and co-operation of pupils in the school. The Transformative Paradigm according to Mertens (2010) was chosen as the theoretical framework for the study. It emphasises social justice, human rights and the inclusion of voices that have not been taken into account sufficiently. Within this paradigm, the principles of the Postcolonial Indigenous Methodologies according to Chilisa (2012) are embraced, which stress (among other things) the relationship with research participants, respect and reciprocity. As the study is still in progress, no final conclusions are given yet. The paper provides an overview of the background to the study, the theoretical assumptions, the chosen methodology and some preliminary findings.

## Background

During the last decades, several international movements concerned with education have emerged in Latin America, the most prominent being “Metas 2021” which developed a plan for the improvement of quality and equality in Latin American education by the end of the celebrations of the 200th anniversary of independence of the Latin American countries in 2021 (OEI, 2010).

Within these international movements, it has sometimes been evident that Latin America needs to find its own culturally adapted concepts and approaches to education, in spite of globalisation. In a separate declaration during the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, Latin American pedagogues and intellectuals made requests for the development of Latin American education. Among these requests, they asked that fundamental Latin American values be taken into consideration in this process, for example:

the sense of community ...: sharing and serving each other, being solidary rather than competitive, ... respecting diversity in the face of tendencies of exclusion, and caring for the weakest and most vulnerable“ (Anon, 2000: 162).

As in many cultures, a ‘sense of community’ and of ‘solidarity’ are explicitly considered relevant values in Latin America (Anon, 2000), not much research has been published about co-operation between pupils in Latin American classrooms, especially concerning schools in so-called ‘high-risk’ neighbourhoods where the experience of a co-operative culture in school might make a great difference for the pupils.

## Personal Background and Preconceptions

The theoretical framework of the project and the methodology used require that I lay open my personal background and the sequence of events that brought me to this investigation. My interest in educational processes in Latin America started very early. I grew up in a rural part of Mexico where my family lived for 13 years, as my parents worked with a humanitarian

project there in a small village in the mountains. While participating in teaching activities in the project, I became aware that I wanted to become a teacher, especially with children who had to face greater challenges in life than others and for whom schools often presented difficulties in providing access to education.

Later in Germany, my country of birth, I studied special education, specialising in learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural difficulties. While writing my final thesis on schools in rural areas in Mexico, I came to the conclusion that the furtherance of collaboration among pupils could be a way of confronting several of the challenges that teachers and pupils have to face. From then on my interest in learning co-operatively started to grow. At the same time my awareness grew of the importance of taking into account the context and local culture when developing teaching methods and materials.

For several years, I have been travelling to El Salvador (and Peru) and working as a volunteer for a Salvadoran Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) whose aim is to support children and families who live in high-risk neighbourhoods. I was invited to assist them in their search for teaching methods that can promote learning in this context. That invitation led to the development of this project for my doctoral thesis.

Recognising there are distinctly different definitions of co-operative learning eg Souvignier (1999: 14), Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (1998: 1-5) and Brody and Davidson, (1998: 6-8) it may be the case that these have each reflected the cultural conditions from which they emerged. Some researchers ask that there be a stronger consideration of cultural aspects in the definition and research of co-operative learning (Phuong-Mai et al, 2009). For this study, in the cultural context described, I have decided not to adopt any particular existing definition because I wanted to be open to context and culture and not restrict myself from seeing things that I might not consider if I had embraced a narrow definition emanating from a different country.

I decided to focus on any sign of people (especially pupils) working together, helping each other or sharing something and, if possible, their understanding of that interaction. Later on I would analyse the data looking for the situations in which it happened, who initiated it and what the results were – any hint on how co-operation and collaboration are seen and experienced in this context.

I hope that as the study continues beyond that reported in this paper, an appropriate description of learning co-operatively will emerge for me that is meaningful in the situation and culture of this setting.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework chosen for this project is the Transformative Paradigm, which according to Mertens is an umbrella term for different approaches to research that speak up for a consideration of “voices [that have been] absent, mis-represented or marginalised” (1999: 5), in order to obtain research results that are truly relevant for the participants (Mertens, 2010: 33).

This approach places a priority on social justice, the furtherance of human rights and the assumption that there are diverse perspectives on social realities which have to be considered in their political, cultural and economic contexts in order to understand their differences. The Transformative Paradigm is congruent with the teachings of Paulo Freire which are widespread and have received great acclaim in Latin America. He was a Brazilian educator “who worked to raise the consciousness of the oppressed ... through transformative educational processes” (Mertens, 2009: 14).

The Postcolonial Indigenous Methodologies can be seen as one of the approaches within the Transformative Paradigm (Mertens, 2009: 65); they are based on the same assumptions as the Transformative Paradigm but with an emphasis on the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and indigenous forms of generation of knowledge and on decolonisation of research methodologies

(Chilisa, 2012: 38–39). Central principles are the four ethical Rs: “relational accountability, respectful representation, reciprocal appropriation, rights and responsibilities”(Chilisa, 2012: 174). This strongly relational approach has consequences for the gathering and the analysis of data and implies that the researcher herself must be prepared to engage in a respectful, transparent, reciprocal and dependable relation to the research participants (Chilisa 2012: 40 and 108–123; González, 2000).

Both approaches are compatible with the context in which the study is conducted with co-operative values as stated by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) and analysed and related to the educational context by Nigel Rayment (ICA, 1995, quoted in Rayment, 2011): “self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity ... honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others”. However, these approaches also bring with them challenges, including the constant confrontation with the question of when a situation should be respectfully accepted as an expression of culture and where positive social change requires giving new ideas to participants beyond their everyday praxes. It is important for me to take into consideration as many different voices as possible, to reflect constantly on my own background and assumptions, take time at the beginning of the project to get thoroughly acquainted with the setting and culture and, when new initiatives are undertaken, (for example the introduction of new methods in a classroom) to proceed with them in constant dialogue with teachers and pupils.

## Whole Study Research Questions

The overall study has been designed to consider the influence of culture and social context on the use of co-operative methods by teachers in a school in a high-risk neighbourhood and the motivation and capability of the pupils from this school to engage in co-operation. The following research questions interested me and guided the development of the study:

- To what extent is co-operation observable in this context?
- Are co-operative methods used by teachers?
- What factors influence the use of co-operative methods?
- What experiences of collaboration and co-operation do children and adults have outside of school?
- Which co-operative methods developed in different contexts can be implemented in these schools in a meaningful way?
- Which co-operative methods could be adapted and how could they be adapted in order to be useful?
- What surrounding conditions, life experiences, cultural values and convictions would have to be taken into account?

## Study Design

In order to answer the very open-ended research questions and to gain insights into the everyday experiences and perspectives of the research participants (taking into account unexpected factors in complex relations), an ethnographic approach was chosen (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010: 15-16 and 35-36). According to Wolcott, ethnography, with its roots in anthropology:

both by tradition and by design, presents the opportunity and the challenge to pursue an inquiry in a manner especially attentive to broad social contexts (2008: 101).

It is a core characteristic of ethnography to use any form of data that can contribute to finding answers to the research questions (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010: 21). However, Angrosino argues that all of the:

great many specific data collection techniques available to ethnographic researchers ... fit into three large categories ....: observation, interviewing, and archival research (2007: 37).

The flexibility of this approach allows access to data that could not otherwise be gathered (Lüders, 2007: 387).

The study was conducted over the course of one school year (February to November 2013), both at the school and in the surrounding neighbourhood from which the pupils were drawn. The school was considered relatively small with just over 100 pupils aged 2-16. It had a ratio of approximately 3:2 boys to girls. The overall study includes:

- Participant observation and informal interviews with teachers throughout the school year, an average of one to three times per week.
- Semi-structured interviews with the principal and the nine teachers of the school (total interview time per participant of 1-1.5 hours).
- Discussion and implementation of co-operative learning methods with the local teachers through five *Círculos de Estudio*, a participatory form of teacher training session.
- Semi-structured interviews with approximately 60 pupils from second to ninth grade (length 3-10 minutes).
- Focus group interviews with the pupils from second to fifth grade (length 10-30 minutes with groups of 2-5 participants).
- A Co-operation Diary with the pupils from second to fifth grade (aged 8-13 years) completed on approximately twenty different school days distributed throughout the second and third trimester of the school year.
- Informal interviews with around 30 parents.
- Formal and informal interviews with six co-workers of an NGO that has worked in the neighbourhood for more than five years.

Beyond the neighbourhood the study included:

- An exploratory inquiry with semi-structured questionnaires at public and private schools in different neighbourhoods of the same municipality about the use of co-operative methods in class.
- An analysis of school-books and the curriculum.

<b>The Co-operation Diary</b>	
The Co-operation Diary is a folder with pages that the pupils filled out after a school day, answering general questions about co-operation and mutual help:	
• Who did I help today?	• How did I help?
• Who helped me?	• How did he or she help?
• Who did I work with?	• What did we accomplish together?
Sometimes, on a day when team work took place, the diary included reflexive questions on how that work went, what contributed to the success and what could be improved next time.	

## Preliminary Findings

An initial analysis of the data gathered thus far (participant observation during seven months, interviews with teachers and pupils, three *Círculos de Estudio* and informal interviews with five parents) suggests the following preliminary findings:

## Teachers' attitudes towards pupils' learning in groups

All interviewed teachers expressed the opinion that learning in groups (including pairs) has positive effects on pupils and should be promoted where possible. Some teachers said they used group work regularly (at least once a week); others hardly used it. I noticed that teachers and children spoke of three different forms of working: individual, in pairs and in groups. This only gives an idea about whether pupils work with other pupils (and if so with how many) or alone. It doesn't include information about the content of the task and about how the pupils proceed while they sit together and are allowed to talk to each other. Therefore I chose to ask for the *form* of working in order to include all instances in which a teacher intends pupils to work together and then to ask for their experiences with it and their opinions about it, in a more detailed way

The term 'co-operative learning' was recognised by some of the interviewed teachers. However, it evoked positive associations even with those who had not heard of it, especially those teachers who had a second job in a co-operative in the afternoons, who explained what they thought the term might mean in a very intense way. For example, one teacher who worked in a financial co-operative said:

I imagine, bearing in mind what co-operativeness is, co-operative learning means that ... all of us learn together, all of us teach each other, I teach you, you teach me ... There is no image of a teacher but instead we are all teachers and we are all pupils ... For me it is the first time that I hear this term, but I have these associations with it because I know ... something about co-operativeness because I work in a co-operative. So I imagine it refers to that. We all share what we know, we all learn what we don't know, we all help each other out of our doubts, we all support each other and there is no need for a teacher to guide us but we all guide each other.

When I first interviewed this teacher about work in groups and pairs, she was very sure that although methods involving these forms of working are very valuable, they could not function with the pupils she had at this school. She was convinced that they would not use being in groups to work efficiently but as an opportunity for distraction and disorder, losing time and talking with each other about other topics rather than working on their assignments.

## Challenges to using group work

Although only one teacher expressed the belief that letting pupils work together was not a viable option for successful teaching in this school, all of the teachers named challenges to implementing mutual student support (eg pupils getting distracted too much or an uneven distribution of the workload).

The general difficulties of teaching in this context that were mentioned several times were, among others, a lack of material resources (for example, the school did not have a photocopier) and a lack of time for the preparation of class as many teachers work in two different jobs, often teaching for nine hours a day and using the time in between the two shifts for getting from one school to the another.

One of the main challenges in this school seems to be a perceived culture of aggression and intimidation in the neighbourhood that seeps into the school. This came up in interviews with parents and pupils, but mostly with teachers:

A mother: "Here, the law of the strongest applies."

A teacher:

so the benches [in the schoolyard] were put away because there was a group there that had taken possession of these benches and no one else could go near them because they would hit them ... so they were taken away so that they would not be allowed to feel like the owners of this space.

A second teacher:

for them, it's the most normal thing ... to treat each other in this offensive way ... Then there is also an issue with aggression. There is a certain level of aggression shown by some towards others. Perhaps



it's not what you would call bullying, but there is let's say that the child that believes himself to possess more, like more power in terms of the situation in the neighbourhood, he feels that he has the same authority at school, as if he could act and no one can tell him anything.

A third teacher:

Since I came here, my hair stood on end when I saw how they attack each other. And you say: 'Child, don't play like that.' 'We are playing', that's what they say ... but it's not a game. Instead, for me it is aggression .... When they are small, they start conditioning to defend themselves. And they call this defence a game. But it's not a game, it's like wanting to learn to defend yourself in any possible way, kicking, biting, hitting, anything. So the interaction among these children is not peaceful, it's aggressive.

A student from second grade: "[What I don't like about school are] the older children, because I don't do anything to them and they pick on me."

A student from seventh grade: "Some kids ... pick on me a lot."

This could be a case of bullying as it is known in other contexts but here it also seems to be an expression of the culture lived out by gangs in many urban neighbourhoods in El Salvador. The second teacher hinted at gang-related power relations between families in the neighbourhood when she used the words "more power in terms of the situation in the neighbourhood".

Teachers, pupils and parents have developed different strategies to deal with this situation. Nevertheless, the topic of aggression arises again and again in interviews as a source of frustration (especially with the teachers).

The aggressive interaction among pupils also seems to affect (either directly or indirectly) the preference of many children for individual work instead of work in groups or pairs (see Table 1):

The children were asked in the interviews about their favourite and least favourite forms of working in class and the reasons for their preferences. These are the reasons the children gave for their preferences (see table 2).

So, despite the positive aspects many children see in working together, for most of them working alone seems to be the favoured option for teachers in order to help pupils stay out of trouble.

Alone	With a Partner	In Groups
62%	20%	18%

Table 1 - Preferred form of working among the pupils of second to fifth grade

	For	Against
<b>Group work</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We help each other.</li> <li>It's more fun being together.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We talk a lot and get distracted.</li> <li>The other children pick on me.</li> <li>Some children get into fights.</li> <li>The other children misbehave.</li> </ul>
<b>Working with a partner</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We can share ideas and opinions.</li> <li>We work harder.</li> <li>We can help each other.</li> <li>We can talk.</li> <li>We can work well.</li> <li>There aren't so many children to pick on me.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If the group behaves badly, I might get into trouble.</li> <li>If you do good work, the others want to copy it.</li> <li>I just don't like being in pairs.</li> <li>They make you do all the work alone.</li> <li>I don't want everybody to ask me questions.</li> <li>All the children want to work with me and I feel smothered.</li> </ul>

Table 2 - Reasons for and against working together (paraphrased)

## Experiences with collaboration and solidarity

Collaboration in the neighbourhood and beyond seems to be mostly spontaneous and out of a sense of solidarity with those that face special challenges — eg a single (grand)mother who falls ill or another neighbourhood nearby facing difficulties after an earthquake. This form of solidarity can also be observed among the children at school, when they share a meal or a plate, share books, allow others to use their utensils, spontaneously explain an exercise to a classmate or help friends with chores.

## Fostering solidarity and co-operation in school

The active encouragement of solidarity and mutual support seems to be an important element in the development of a more co-operative classroom culture. One teacher (not a teacher of the pupils from second to fifth grade) viewed solidarity, co-operativeness and mutual help as some of the main values that have to be learned in school. She was convinced that by fostering them, in the long run, she could not only influence the interactions among pupils positively but could also bring change to the neighbourhood and to society as a whole.

She told me about positive experiences she had had encouraging the learning of these values through different strategies and she told the pupils a vivid story about co-operation:

I told them the story of a father who had three sons, and when he was dying, he called them and said: 'Each of you, take one of these sticks. ... Now break it.' They all broke it immediately. Then he said: 'Now take this bundle of the same sticks. ... Try to break it.' They tried one by one and couldn't. They tried together and couldn't. Then the father told them: 'If you are united, no one will be able to go against you. But if you are separated, anyone will be able to do what they want with you.'

She introduced practical tokens of solidarity in the routines of the school day:

For example, all of us bring a plate, because we receive food here ... And every one of us decides on a day and that day it's our turn to bring bread. I participate in that. We bring one dollar of bread for all of us. The next day it's the turn of other two people [to bring bread to accompany the food]. So we are doing what is called co-operation and at the same time we are solidary. Because sometimes there are some who can't and they say: I can't but when I have them, I will bring the fifty cents. ... And so we share the bread and we learn companionship, too, because we sit together for the meal. In this way, she used working in groups as a way to teach pupils to get along with each other.

I would say [my experiences with group work have been] rather good because in the beginning there were some who didn't want to relate to each other and today they get along very well ... if they get along here, they will get along in the *comunidad*.

In the interview, she repeated that she had seen changes in the interaction of the pupils and that she was convinced of the transformation these learning processes could bring about.

Transformation in the classroom (in the sense of positive change) through the fostering of co-operation could also be seen in the classroom of the teacher (to whom I previously referred) who had expressed that the use of group work did not make sense with her pupils. We started trying a few exercises in groups, group building activities, co-operative learning methods like the Jigsaw and reflection of group processes with the children. Sometimes she would teach the class, sometimes I would. Afterwards we spoke about the experiences and about ideas for the future. Although we are still very much at the beginning of the process of introducing more co-operation in learning activities and conflicts among the children and other challenges have to be met every day, I have also seen positive outcomes:

- The development of new routines, for example, the children coming together in their fixed groups automatically when they see the tables standing in groups of four, even though at the beginning they were not fond of working with the classmates to whom they were assigned by lot.
- One group in the reflection phase happily recounting that they succeeded in working

together even though it was difficult at the beginning and that they achieved it without getting into an argument.

- Children proudly presenting their group products, celebrating their success together and insisting on having every group member in a group photo, even one who came too late to participate in the work.
- Children saying “we” and “us” and writing the name of the group on a page even before starting to work on the assignment.
- The teacher coming to the conclusion that the pupils seem to work better and to be more motivated when in groups and deciding that grading group work at school is a viable alternative to grading homework and traditional individual exams, as the children have difficulties studying alone at home.

## **Preliminary Conclusions**

This study is not yet finished; the final interviews with pupils and teachers lie ahead and the interviews with parents and co-workers of the NGO are underway at the time of writing. A thorough analysis of the data has therefore yet to be made. However, some hints at partial answers about the context and culture and their influence on co-operation are emerging. This preliminary analysis indicates a number of challenges to effective co-operation the classroom: (a) the aggressive elements in the culture of the surrounding neighbourhood that influenced interactions at school, and (b) the threats to successful teaching in general, brought about by issues such as the lack of materials and time.

At the same time, the analysis also indicates that there are opportunities for co-operation and the availability of resources to draw on; for example, pupils’ everyday experiences of solidarity and mutual support and teachers’ positive associations with co-operation. The teachers’ conviction that they can truly bring about positive change through actively fostering co-operation and collaboration seems to be an important element.

It is anticipated that some of the findings may not be conclusive, even after the completion of the project, especially concerning specific co-operative approaches and the factors that might enable them to be effective in this context. To take this work forward further research will be necessary although I believe that general tendencies will become clearer. At the end of the study I hope to be able to describe co-operation in this school and demonstrate its benefits, together with the most important factors that have given rise to it. I then hope to generate ideas of how positive social change through co-operation can be supported in this institution and others in similar contexts.

Through continued data collection and analysis it is expected to demonstrate that transformation is possible in the classroom when co-operative approaches are embraced.

## **The Author**

Christine Schmalenbach is a Special Education Teacher and Research Associate at the Department of Social and Emotional Development in Rehabilitation and Education of The Faculty of Rehabilitation Sciences at the TU Dortmund University in Germany. She has lived in Mexico and travelled to other Latin American countries (mostly Peru and El Salvador). Her main research interest lies in pedagogical and didactical strategies that facilitate access to education for children who live in challenging circumstances. At the moment she is working on her dissertation thesis in El Salvador in co-operation with the Universidad Don Bosco. All translations of interviews and Spanish texts by author.



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