

Learning for Well-being Magazine ②

Published by Universal Education Foundation – Learning for Well-being
www.l4wb-magazine.org

Looney, J. (2016) 'Learning for social cohesion and inclusion',
in Learning for Well-being Magazine, Issue 2, published by
Universal Education Foundation.

Learning for social cohesion and inclusion

By Janet Looney

Introduction

In its March 2000 'Lisbon Strategy'; the European Council set out social cohesion and social inclusion for vulnerable groups as priorities for education and training. While as of yet there is no single, widely shared definition of social cohesion, according to the OECD:

A cohesive society [which] works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility. While the notion of 'social cohesion' is often used with different meanings, its constituent elements include concerns about social inclusion, social capital and social mobility.
(OECD, 2011)

The Council of Europe defines social cohesion as '...the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation' (CE High-Level Task Force, 2008). The Commission has itself taken several actions in support of social cohesion and inclusion in education, including setting targets to reduce school drop-out (a major contributor to social inequity) and to modernise curricula and teaching and assessment methods to better meet the needs of diverse learners.

Ultimately, the success of these policies will be judged according to measures such as rates of school completion and improvements in academic performance among marginalised learners. These are vital indicators of success. Yet social cohesion and inclusion are by definition about much more than academic performance. In the long-term, these goals are also about building trust and belonging within communities, as well as economic opportunity. In the near-term, the quality of cohesion within schools and classrooms – that is, the quality of relationships between and among educators and learners – is also vital.

In this article, I will argue that although there is increasing attention to social cohesion as an important outcome of educational participation, little attention has been paid to how to

promote it within schools. In effect, by leaving out a clear focus on the quality of relationships in schools and classrooms, we are missing a major opportunity.

In the next section, I will briefly highlight some key evidence on the importance of positive relationships for learning (cognitive as well as social-emotional). This will be followed by a discussion of priorities for change.

A few highlights from the research

It is now widely accepted that learning is a fundamentally social activity. Individuals learn through their interactions within a group and in their shared efforts to make meaning (Dewey, 1916; Vygotsky, 1978). Over the past decades, a rich and diverse body of evidence has added to understanding the social nature of learning and the importance of positive relationships. Research in educational psychology, neuroscience, organisation and management, children's rights, and other fields use very different frames of reference. Here, I mention just a few examples to give an idea of the range of interest.

Some of the most compelling research on the impact of social interaction on learning has been conducted in the emerging field of social cognitive neuroscience. Storch (2015) for example, points to the powerful impact of cooperation based on equality and mutuality. 'Equality' refers to learners' ability to engage in 'interactive turn-taking'; 'mutuality' refers to sharing of ideas and giving feedback. Shilbach et al. (2013) have found that reciprocity in interactions activates the brain's reward circuitry. They refer to the importance of 'mutual social empathy and engagement' for effective cooperation. On the other hand, if learners experience threats to their self-esteem or inequitable interactions, they are likely to withdraw from peer interaction. It is therefore vital to carefully organise the 'peer-learning' ecology in order to support reciprocity and emotional engagement (Clark, 2014; Clark and Dumas, 2015). Shared intentions are also key to effective 'co-regulation' in learning (Nadel and Dumas, 2014).

A number of studies confirm that school and classroom climate have an important impact on learning. Hattie (2009), in his synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses of education research notes that classroom cohesion – that is, the sense that teachers and students are focused on learning achievement – is a key factor in positive classroom climate. Evans and Dion (1991) found that the relationship between classroom cohesion and student performance was stable over time and positive. Birch and Ladd (1998) suggest that positive relationships support communal learning and transmit social capital. These findings are further supported by PISA results (OECD, 2014¹) which found that in 48 of the countries and economies participating in PISA 2012, a more positive learning climate was associated with better average student performance on PISA, regardless of students' socio-economic status and other school-level factors.

UNICEF has developed the Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) to ensure that children's rights are integral to school culture. The principles of the RRSA, in line with the

¹ <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-volume-i.htm>

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), equality, dignity, respect, non-discrimination and participation. All members of the school community learn about rights. School governance, curricula and teaching and assessment take a rights-based approach². They also learn how to take action to be sure that rights are protected in every situation. Evaluations of the RRSA have shown improvements in student attendance and achievement, and also improved relations between and among staff and learners, improved intercultural understanding, and improved parental and community engagement (Sebba and Robinson, 2010).

Recognition of learners' cultural identities is also important to cohesion, and as classrooms in many parts of the world are increasingly diverse, this is a vital area of concern. For example, the New Zealand Te Kotatihanga programme, which is based on a 'culturally responsive pedagogy of relations', was initiated in 2001 to address high levels of drop-out and low achievement levels among Maori students and holds lessons for educators in Europe. At the beginning of the New Zealand project, learners were asked to talk about their classroom experiences and family members to talk about their experiences with teachers and school leaders. Teachers were thus encouraged to listen to and learn from students, and students were empowered as collaborators in the reform process. The Effective Teaching Profile (ETP) is now used to further train teachers working with Maori learners. They are encouraged to reject deficit theorising regarding Maori learner achievement, and to take responsibility for helping their students to learn. Teachers are encouraged to show that the learners' cultural identity matters, that they have high expectations for learning, manage classrooms to support learning, and interact with learners to identify needs and shape teaching and learning. Evaluations show that the Te Kotatihanga programme has had a significant impact on Maori learner outcomes, with a 260% increase in Maori students participating in senior school since the project first began. The lessons of this project are of real relevance for European education systems, as well (Bishop et al., 2009).

A need to focus on inputs and processes as well as outcomes

In education, policy goals for social cohesion generally focus on ensuring that all children and youth have access to quality learning. As noted above, the success of these policies typically is measured in terms of school completion and levels of academic achievement. Policies for educational inclusion, in principle, promote high levels of achievement for all students, and not just the privileged few. These policies also emphasise the importance of tailoring learning to meet diverse learner needs. Other policies, such as qualifications frameworks, which define pathways for progression, open opportunities for more learners to participate in higher levels of education.

Policy-makers are also paying increasing attention to measures of the 'social outcomes of learning'. These measures contribute to our understanding of the contribution of education to economic as well as social well-being. However, data typically focus at the macro-level, such as correlations between years of participation in education and health behaviours such

² <http://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/>

as smoking or alcohol consumption, or civic engagement through participation in community activities, or levels of trust in government or among neighbours (OECD, 2010).

Yet policies that focus on long-term social outcomes pay little attention to the kinds of educational inputs that may support them. Are some models of school governance more effective at creating a cohesive and inclusive climate in schools and classrooms? Do some approaches to teaching and learning support better social outcomes? Do early positive experiences with peer learning promote social-emotional skills? How can teachers balance diverse cultural and individual needs of their students? Can schools do more to support children's rights? Do educational approaches that support social cohesion and inclusion in schools and classrooms also have an impact on long-term social outcomes?

Moving forward

We will not make real progress toward European priorities for social cohesion and inclusion in education and training until we think more carefully about *how* to make it happen in schools and classrooms. In this section, I want to address briefly what I regard as the most significant priorities for change in education: mindset, capacity, quality assurance and research.

Mindset

'Mindset' refers to beliefs, or fixed mental attitudes or dispositions (Dweck, 2008). Mindset shapes the quality of interactions between and among members of the school community, beliefs about learners' capacities, and decisions about how to orchestrate learning. Greater participation and voice of all stakeholders in the school community can be vital for shifting mindset. In his early research on teachers' attitudes toward Maori learners in New Zealand, Bishop interviewed students in classrooms. In response to the question 'Does your teacher like you?', many of the ethnic minority students said no, while white students said yes. Teachers who had thought they had positive relationships with all students started to question how their students experienced teaching and learning (Hattie, 2009). UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools Award, described above, also has an important focus on participation and voice for all stakeholders, and evaluations show that this has had a dramatic impact on the nature of relationships in schools and classrooms.

Strategies to shift teacher mindset should also draw on and mirror what we know about the importance of positive relationships for teaching and learning. Participation and voice within schools (Pont et al., 2008), and in professional networks (Seashore L. et al., 2010) may have an important impact on practice and student achievement. For example, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) in Chicago found that among low-performing schools that had been placed on probation, those that had previously developed strong cultures of peer collaboration were able to exit probationary status relatively rapidly (over about one and a half years). The CPRE survey data showed that teachers in the more successful schools had stronger levels of trust (O'Day, 2002).

Capacity

The work of school leaders and teachers is increasingly complex. They are asked to keep pace with developments in their subject areas, to integrate new technologies, to address the needs of diverse learners, to engage with the broader community, to assess not only knowledge, but also skills and attitudes, and so on (OECD, 2005a). They cannot do this work without appropriate training, tools and guidelines. Indeed, initial training and professional development for educators and other supports need a fundamental rethinking.

School leaders need skills not only to create a good learning climate, but also to create a climate of trust among staff and learners. For example, Mulford and colleagues (2004) in their survey of 2,500 teachers and 3,500 15-year-old Australian high school students found that three elements - a trusting collaborative climate, shared and monitored mission, and opportunities to take initiatives risks, when supported by appropriate professional development – were directly related to positive learning outcomes, while leadership models (e.g. distributed leadership) only had an indirect impact.

Teachers also need to create a climate of trust within their classrooms. Indeed, trust is key to effective learning, as each learner needs to feel safe to reveal what he/she does and does not understand and to make mistakes (OECD, 2005). In an example of this, Bonner (2014), found in a study on 'culturally responsive mathematics teaching' (CRMT) that relationships and trust were central to effective teaching, regardless of the cultural setting.

But it is also important to note that teachers do not necessarily have the training or the tools needed for the very difficult task of building trust within the classroom. They may also need a deeper understanding of learners' social-emotional development, the impact of culture, and other differences among learners in their classrooms. If teachers are to respond to the individual needs of diverse students, they need skills to diagnose needs, as well as a wide repertoire of methods to respond to those needs (OECD, 2005b).

School leaders and teachers may also need support for more pragmatic, everyday aspects of school governance and classroom management. While the Clark and Dumas (2015) study on the neuroscience of peer learning provides some convincing evidence of its benefits, teachers may struggle to orchestrate effective peer learning. Collaboration is neither automatic nor easy.

Quality Assurance: measuring both process and outcome

Quality assurance systems, which include school evaluation (both internal and external), teacher appraisal and student assessment tend to focus on those aspects that are easiest to quantify (e.g. through test scores). But if systems are to support social cohesion within school communities, evaluators and educators will need to share a common understanding of what it entails and how it can be monitored.

Those evaluating schools and/or appraising teacher performance may need training on what to observe in regard to school climate, levels of trust, and the quality of relationships among teachers and learners. Opportunities for teachers to observe each other and to give feedback on a regular basis may also be important for development. This kind of

professional peer interaction, done well, may strengthen trust and collaboration among teachers.

It is also important to mention approaches to student assessment. New tools are needed to help learners track their own social-emotional development (e.g. allowing students to monitor their own progress in developing self-discipline, persistence, ability to work with others and so on). Attention to these aspects can be vital for helping learners to cultivate mindfulness in their interactions and personal development.

We need to not only understand 'what works' but also for whom, why and in what conditions. Research on the context of interventions may provide much more insight on *how* to best develop this aspect. Teachers' action research can also contribute not only to understanding, but also to development. This iterative and practical approach to research allows teachers to monitor their impact and to adjust approaches if needed. Learners may also play a more active role in stating what approaches work best for them. Indeed, one of the most important features of the different interventions described above is their emphasis on learner voice and participation.

Conclusion

In his review of empirical research on education, Hattie (2009) notes that the success of educational interventions focuses almost exclusively on academic achievement. As he acknowledges, 'researchers rarely discuss the importance of passion in teaching and learning, '... as if doing so makes the work of teachers seem less serious, more emotional than cognitive, somewhat biased or of lesser import.' The very human nature of teaching and learning seems somehow to have been forgotten. Yet passion, caring and trust are at the centre of good teaching and learning.

Clearly, much more work needs to be done to ensure that social cohesion in schools and classrooms is seen as a vital component of education. We also need to develop a much deeper understanding about how to achieve it, how to measure it, and how to ensure that the cohesion developed in school communities can support strong and cohesive societies.

Author

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