CULTURAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY, COOPERATIVE LEARNING AND THE TEACHER'S ROLE

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Abstract – *No one could deny the evidence that we all live in an increasingly diverse and interdependent society. This diversity affects all fields of society. Education is certainly not an exception. To attain the best in their teaching (and, probably, also in their lives in general), teachers, and educators in general, have to be prepared to better understand this diversity, which can be displayed in a range of different languages or dialects, religious or ethical beliefs, ethnic groups, cultures, and so on. If teaching is a challenge, teaching for an intercultural understanding is even a greater one. The purpose of the paper is to show the utility of using cooperative (or collaborative) learning techniques in teaching. Within the paper we refer to a number of research projects and experiences which show that cooperative learning methods in multicultural settings are a highly recommendable tool for educators.*

Introduction

A number of scholars (among them Foyle, Lyman and Thies 1991; Lyman, Foyle and Azwell 1993) have indicated that by no means is peer collaboration a new concept. In fact, most of the investigation on cooperative (or collaborative) learning (CL) has been conducted since the early 1970s.[1] The different studies conducted lead us to believe in the benefits of CL. However, there is a need for implementing CL progressively, step-by-step.

Furthermore, broad research has demonstrated that CL groups promote high achievement and positive interpersonal outcomes, but only under certain conditions (see, for example, Johnson and Johnson 1987b, 1989; Slavin 1995a, 1995b; Santos-Rego, 1994). In addition, relatively recent research has found that CL is 'a natural vehicle for promoting multicultural understandings (...), finding that all members of collaborative groups became more accepting of racially and culturally different classmates' (Davidson and Worsham, 1992; quoted in Adams and Hamm 1994: 47-48). Unfortunately, the numerous potential benefits of CL are not always apprehended in our classrooms, due to poor, partial implementation or infrequent use (Joyce 1992; Santos-Rego, 1990, 1991). In general, educators are not aware of what the essential conditions are for CL to lead to positive outcomes.

The job cannot be done by simply placing students in groups and asking them to cooperate.

It is the purpose of this paper, to make reference to the benefits of using CL techniques in heterogeneous classrooms, and to reflect on the new role teachers have to play (see Nieto, 1998; Nieto and Santos-Rego, 1998; Santos-Rego and Pérez-Domínguez, 1998; Pérez-Domínguez, 1997, 1998).

Despite the widespread use of this technique in the USA, and the recognition of its convenient methods in the classroom to promote multicultural harmony (Davidson and Worsham. 1992; Costa, 1991), teacher preparation in CL methods is still far from being adequately implemented (Abi-Nader, 1993; Alexander, 1991; Bowers and Finders 1990; Brophy and Good, 1986; Burton, 1987; Adams and Hamm, 1986; Davidson and Worsham, 1992; Good and Brophy, 1994; Wlodkowski and Jayne, 1990).

The writers would like to encourage the idea of paying particular attention to current and prospective teachers' preparation in CL methods. We are convinced that the study and employment of CL methods, in conjunction with other instructional strategies, is most appropriate (see Dana and Floyd 1993; Montgomery *et al.* 1993; Sparks and Verner 1993; Sudzina 1993). Putnam (1993: 16) has addressed similar concerns by pointing out that: 'Problems are likely to arise when teachers have not been adequately exposed to cooperative learning in their teacher preparation programs or through inservice training. Additionally, teachers sometimes face barriers such as organisational constraints or a lack of support in their schools'.

Teaching in heterogeneous classrooms: can cooperative learning help?

As the literature has shown, CL is normally best accomplished in heterogeneous student groups. 'Ethnic, racial, religious, gender, academic achievement, skill ability, and other factors may be used to group students. Mixed groups have the greatest potential for success in cooperative learning because student differences make for greater student interaction within the groups' (Lyman, Foyle, and Azwell 1993: 31). As Sonia Nieto (1996) has signalled, CL is an approach compatible with diverse cultural groups. It animates children to respect and value one another.

Perhaps, one of the most important responsibilities of educators is responding to the needs, not only of academically diverse students, but also of ethnic/racial, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity (Fradd and Weismantel 1990; Sleeter and Grant 1987). Traditionally, schools have responded to student diversity with

pull out or alternative programmes, many of which have included an over-representation of minorities (Oakes, 1985). However, a surge of interest has emerged in inclusive instrumental practices such as CL (Johnson, Johnson and Holubec, 1990; Slavin, 1995a, 1995b) and multicultural education to address the historical neglect of non-Eurocentric viewpoints in the curriculum (Banks, 1995). In this sense, Banks (1991: 114) pointed out that:

> 'Teachers must play an active role in getting students to undertake personal and social action to improve race relations in their personal lives and in the institutions in which they function. To improve race relations in the classroom, you can structure interracial work and study groups. Research has indicated that when students from different races and social classes have equal status within interracial work and study groups, these groups can improve interracial attitudes and help students of color to increase their academic achievement.'

Johnson and Johnson (1993) acknowledge the compatibility of CL and diversity because, when using CL in heterogeneous classrooms, students in general do better and develop themselves as persons by considering others' ideas and perspectives. They also say:

> 'The key to the success of heterogeneous cooperative groups may well be the *persistence of teachers* who are determined to build a cooperative umbrella over a diverse group of students by teaching them the skills that they need to make inclusion work' (p. xiii; Foreword to *Cooperative Learning and Strategies for Inclusion*).

It can then be said that the importance of teachers/educators implementing CL techniques and transmitting them effectively to students is paramount. Johnson and Johnson, in their foreword to JoAnne W. Putnam's book, *Cooperative Learning and Strategies for Inclusion* (1993: xiii) indicated that persistence is indeed necessary to obtain good results. Things cannot be achieved over night. But when teachers persist in changing classrooms into cooperative settings, a number of positive effects come out, such as:

1. The achievement levels of all students increase. Although the largest gains usually occur among students at the struggling, undermotivated end of the spectrum, there are clear achievement benefits for all students. For example, at the University of Minnesota, where Johnson and Johnson teach, Dr. Pat Heller has found that the most accomplished physics students achieve higher on problem solving when they work cooperatively with others who are less able than themselves than they do when working alone.

2. Students tend to feel more positive about themselves and to be better psychologically adjusted when they are part of a group in a cooperative setting.

3. Students also accept differences more readily, both in and outside of the classroom. Cooperative efforts can help them outgrow their initial narrow stereotypes of one another and find out who each member of the team really is as they work toward a common goal and celebrate team efforts together.

Villa and Thousand (1993) remarked the importance of the observation of behaviours manifested by role models. A critical duty of the teacher, then, in preparing students for the cooperative workplace and for the society of the 21st century, is to model cooperative teaching; thus students learn through observation how two or more people coordinate instructional, behaviour management, and student-evaluation activities (see also Abraham and Campbell, 1984).

This demand of modelling has incisively been pointed out by Harris (1987: 1) by saying that 'The integration of professionals within a school system is a prerequisite to the successful integration of students. We cannot ask our students to do those things which we as professionals are unwilling to do'.

An exemplary role model teacher using cooperative learning techniques: Ms. Penrose's case

Ms. Penrose is a White[2] urban inner-city middle school teacher in the United States. Her class of 30 teenagers included a cultural, ethnic/racial, linguistic, and religious mix of African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asians (Cambodian, Vietnamese, East-Indian, and Malaysian). Language and ethnic/racial differences were noticeable among the students, but there were also academic differences that were not so evident. Although many of her students were classified as needing remediation, Ms. Penrose had arranged with the school administrators that none of her students would be removed for special classes. A majority of the students were of low socioeconomic status and many came from families that had been described as dysfunctional. The school itself was located in a neighbourhood with violence and drug dealing problems.

Ms. Penrose, had ten years of experience teaching adolescents. She had tested CL five years earlier and became 'hooked on it'. Ms. Penrose was known within the school for her adoption of the Johnson and Johnson model of CL (Johnson, Johnson and Holubec, 1990), and her teaching was distinguished by much enthusiasm and strength as she herself demonstrated a disposition of care and interest for her students. Indeed, her challenge was not only to motivate the students academically, but also to support them to learn to tackle diversity and

racism, as well as to establish and maintain their 'chain of friendship', the fitting metaphor used by one of her students, Mounty Nguyen (see Williams, 1993).

The writers venture that the reader would agree that Ms. Penrose, in her academically and culturally diverse classroom, was certainly a role model and an inspiration for others. She utilised the subject of CL itself as an assignment in her language arts classes. Following teaching the students how to write cogent essays, she invited them to write an essay on: (1) *how* they experienced CL and, (2) *why* they experienced it as they did. The various benefits of CL named by students in Ms. Penrose's class, associated to both academic tasks and social interaction, can be classified as follows:

a) *Opportunities to experience different approaches to learning and a variety of answers:* CL come into view by many students as supplying chances for them to learn in 'many different ways'. One student wrote: 'In groups we can have more than one answer or opinion on questions; when we don't understand the teacher, and a peer explains in different words, it helps a lot'. Other students stated their feelings as follows: 'We learn new things from other student's ideas', and 'Kids in my group might have different opinions than others. Some might agree and some might disagree; but they can tell *why* to help others understand'.

b) *Peer/Social interaction and sharing:* One could deduce that a majority of essays rotated around the opportunity for peer interaction, which is fundamental for adolescents. Some of the assertions favourable to CL were:

'You get to talk to kids; there's a lot of eye contact, which shows that students really care...'

'I am for group work because kids can help each other gain confidence in themselves. Other students help praise one another, also helping each other when it's needed and don't put each other down as much. So I really think group work is very important.'

Those that liked CL felt that they could share ideas in groups; that they sometimes learned to 'compromise' in the process if someone else was more convincing; and that big projects got done best when tasks were discussed and problems were solved together.

c) *More fun during learning:* A number of students discovered in CL the opportunity to talk with peers and put their heads to work simultaneously to resolve problems to be 'more fun' than traditional classroom activities.

d) *Free ride, goofing off, time-on-task concerns:* These problems were mentioned more often by those students who disliked CL, as well as by those who liked it but with reservations. Some kids 'just goof off' – talk, disrupt the group

process, or do not contribute anything, yet still enjoy their benefits of the group. 'Free ride' was an issue across performance levels, not just for the high-achieving students. Those who favoured to work by themselves expressed disagreement:

'I don't enjoy working in groups because I don't get as much done as when I work by myself. Some students start to play and talk and we don't get it [the work] done.'

e) *Quality of work:* Many students mentioned that they liked CL because the work was finished not only faster, but also, better, because of the benefit of debates with other group members. 'I have the benefit of four brains, instead of only one, when I work in groups', was a characteristic reply.

f) *Future benefits/disadvantages:* The benefits/advantages debated were the following: 'There are hardly any jobs in the world where you work alone; and working in groups make kids grow to like working and helps them develop a positive attitude and outlook on group work'. Although, 'we can get better grades', was another benefit/advantage proclaimed by most students, a few supposed that their grades were influenced negatively by CL. Amid other disadvantages was the sensation that the usage of CL at the middle school level did not make adolescents ready for high school or college. This critique mirrored a semblance of high school and college atmosphere in which competition is the agreeable model. In like manner, one student wrote:

'I enjoy working in both groups and alone. I think we should keep working in groups because that would help the children get used to working with other children. Children need to feel good working with other children, they need to feel like they can trust other children. [But] it would be healthy also to let children work alone... [since they] need to know how to depend on themselves also. They need to have a chance to make it happen on their own.'

Let us now consider the results of Ms. Penrose's CL techniques, by listening to the voices of two of her students, who, after an academic year with her, manifested not only understanding but also approval of cultural diversity:

'Diversity means how you are different from one another. Well, everybody is different in some ways. My grandmother always used to tell me, no one's ugly. She's always telling, God did not make nobody ugly. 'Cuz what's in you is not someone else and that's your unique. And now, Ms. Penrose made me realised that cooperative learning teaches you to see strength [in that] which is unique in each one of us.'

Temekia Johnson, African American

'Students stereotype one another. People I thought were different – with different skin color and not like me, wearing certain kinds of clothing, talking on a different way or sometimes different language, I didn't know how to approach. But now, a year later, those same students are my friends. Working in group and learning to cooperate helped me to understand that I had stereotyped those same students who are my friends now. You kinda have to know how to approach others, learn to deal with differences, instead of making fun of them.'

John Parker, Caucasian

(See Williams 1993).

The misuse of cooperative learning

Pieter Batelaan (1992: 9-10) discusses some educators' misuse of CL, by pointing out that:

'In most of the works of specialists in cooperative learning such as Slavin and Johnson and Johnson there is no explicit reference to the consequences of diversity within the classroom. Both aim at better results for those who are the low achievers in the traditional teaching-learning situation, but in their work there is no attention for the essence of inequality which exists within the classroom as a result of differences in societal, academic and peer status.'

Batelaan, however, recognises Cohen's work as it is '...so important for multicultural or intercultural education, because it deals explicitly with inequality on a classroom level' *(ibid.*: 10). In fact, Elizabeth G. Cohen (1986: 13), had stated that 'If status characteristics are allowed to operate unchecked in the classroom, the interaction of children will only reinforce the prejudices they entered school with' (see also her works of 1990 and 1994).

Some years later, Slavin (1995b) claimed that, at least in theory, CL methods fulfil Allport's *contact theory* (1954: 629) for its worthy effects on desegregation on race relations, that is to say: 'cooperation across racial lines, equal-status roles for students of different races, contact across racial lines that permits students to learn about one another as individuals and communication of unequivocal teacher support for interracial contact'. In, maybe, an attempt for additional elucidation, Slavin *(ibid.*: 629) has also argued that:

'The cooperative-learning methods are designed to be true changes in classroom organisation, not time-limited 'treatments.' They provide daily opportunities for intense interpersonal contact among students of different

races. When the teacher assigns students of different races or ethnicities to work together, this communicates unequivocal support on the teacher's part for the idea that interracial or interethnic interaction is officially sanctioned. Even though race or race relations *per se* need not be mentioned (and rarely are) in the course of cooperative-learning experiences, it is difficult for a student to believe the teacher supports racial separation when the teacher has assigned the class to multiethnic teams.'

Slavin postulates that the results of the studies which relate cooperative learning and intergroup relations certainly show that if students work in ethnically mixed CL groups, they increase cross-ethnic friendships. However, he also recognises that supplementary research is required, particularly outside school. Additionally, long-term follow-up data are needed to determine how long the effects of cooperative learning last. Despite the fact that some studies have already been conducted (see Oishi, 1983; Oishi, Slavin and Madden, 1983; Ziegler, 1981) 'much more work is needed to discover the critical components of cooperative learning and to inform a model of how these methods affect intergroup relations' (Slavin, 1995b: 633).

Cooperative learning and intercultural education in Spain

Despite the abundance of research into intercultural or multicultural education in Spain (being a country particularly characterised by its territorial and linguistic diversity),[3] very little research has been undertaken regarding the empirical potential of CL techniques in culturally and ethnically diverse contexts (both in and out of schools).

There is still a noticeable lack of attention paid to the possible beneficial effects of CL on academic achievement in areas with a growing immigrant population[4] – without forgetting the Roma (or Gypsy) population, present in Spain since 1425 (see Díaz-Aguado 1996; Liégeois 1987).

Until 1990, with the New Education Reform Act (called *Ley Orgánica de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo* or LOGSE), one could say that no legal academic documents existed which made a connection between ethnic and cultural diversity and its influence on schools' educational goals. Since the introduction of the LOGSE, collaborative strategies in the teaching-learning process have begun to be taken into account. The Reform promotes an innovative collaborative philosophy among teachers, with the introduction of cross-curricular teaching. This means that areas such as education for peace, education for development, education for human rights, or intercultural

education, all have as a common denominator an interdisciplinary and global focus.

Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that new theoretical models have emerged in the pedagogical approach to ethnic and cultural diversity in the Spanish society. Mainly since 1990 a number of educators have adopted teaching methods based on the paradigm of CL (Ortega *et al.,* 1996; Ovejero, 1990; Santos-Rego, 1990, 1991, 1994). Our work and collaboration at the Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, USA) with professor Robert E. Slavin, along with other members of his team, has been a significant stimulus for us in the field of CL.

Finally, certain empirical research programmes deserve to be mentioned, since they relate cooperative learning with ethnic and cultural diversity. In this sense, we would like to highlight two significant lines of investigation.

It is important in this context to refer to the research undertaken at the University of Madrid (Complutense) by Díaz-Aguado and her team (see Díaz-Aguado, 1996, 1997). Briefly, this research was based on the construction and adaptation of different useful instruments for CL, devised for fundamental, but not exclusive, application in ethnic and culturally heterogeneous school contexts (in primary and secondary education). Some of the most relevant conclusions are:

- The need to educate the whole population, organising specific activities related to the prevention of racism and intolerance.
- The importance of collaboration as an educational objective in heterogeneous contexts.
- The positive correlation between the use of CL techniques and the students' academic achievement.
- The important value of CL as a strategy which reduces prejudice, as well as helping students' moral development.

It is also important to mention the research undertaken at the University of Valencia by Sales-Ciges and García-López (1997, 1998). These scholars have adopted a line of research and pedagogical intervention using CL techniques, and they are inspired by the work undertaken by Escámez-Sánchez and Ortega-Ruiz (1988). Their research has, as its main objective, the development of intervention and attitude changing programmes in teachers and in the teaching-learning process in multicultural contexts. Based on the Fishbein and Ajzen's Reasoned Action Approach, it aims to improve the attitudes of teachers and educators towards the differences and similarities that all their students bring to class in an ever increasing multicultural and multiethnic Spanish society.

Conclusions

It has been argued that cooperative group learning models are the most carefully researched educational approaches for promoting heterogeneous student grouping (Johnson and Johnson, 1987a; Slavin, 1984, 1987a, 1989a, 1989b). These models are reaching greater notoriety and recognition as school staff admit the requirement to cultivate students' social and interpersonal ability development, and to modernise mixed school communities which ought to reflect and equip students for the 'real world' of the 21st century 'an ever-changing global community in which diversity (e.g., cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, economic, and ability) will be the norm' (Villa and Thousand 1993: 57). Furthermore, CL techniques, as they help students to increase their academic achievement and to develop better attitudes around the dissimilar, have been categorised as both 'equity pedagogy' and 'prejudice reduction strategies' (Aronson and Bridgeman, 1979; Slavin, 1985).

We shall sum up by reiterating four thoughts that we envision as essential in current and future developments of CL, both for mainstream and diverse teaching environments:

1) CL has known positive effects for students and teachers, both in mainstream and heterogeneous classes (see, among others, Abraham and Campbell, 1984; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1988; Johnson, 1990; Johnson *et al.,* 1981; Kagan, 1986, Levine and Trachman, 1988; Ovejero, 1990; Sharon, 1980; Slavin, 1983, 1989a, 1995b):

- motivates students,
- increases academic performance,
- encourages active learning,
- helps students to assume academic responsibilities,
- raises respect for diversity and heterogeneity,
- promotes literacy and language skills,
- prepares students for today's society,
- contributes to education for democracy,
- improves teacher effectiveness.

2) It seems that educators tend to agree that in today's heterogeneous classrooms and schools, the goals of public education are most likely to be attained by teaching children to work and to learn together (for an interesting reflection on Freinet ideas and how he relates learning and work, see Clandfield and Sivell, 1990), that is, by adopting CL techniques in classrooms and encouraging the cooperation and teaming of teachers, parents and others (Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Slavin, 1995a).

3) It is important to keep in mind that there is a huge difference between simply putting students into groups and actually teaching them to care about one another's learning. The first has to do with seating arrangements, the second with real interaction. (...) There are five basic elements that must be functioning adequately in order to foster a cooperative relationship: *positive independence, individual accountability, small-group skills, face-to-face interaction,* and *analysis of results.* In order for teachers to successfully structure cooperative learning groups among students they must devote themselves to a serious study of what cooperation is and of what strategies are most effective for making it work. Johnson and Johnson (1993; xiii) presume that it takes about 2 years of practice (2 or 3 years, in the opinion of Putnam, 1993) to harmonise cooperative teaching and learning procedures into one's repertoire in order to transform them to be natural and serviceable.

4) As we have seen through the literature, the process of accomplishing and implementing CL, both in mainstream and diverse classrooms, requires variation (sometimes it is necessary to make a total change) in the way teachers prepare and conduct their classrooms. The transition from conventional whole-class schooling to a cooperative model is not precisely easy; however, it can be seen as an excellent investment in the future of a diverse culture of students and teachers. Therefore, appropriate changes and modifications in teaching techniques are paramount.

We would like to end these reflections with a quotation by JoAnne W. Putnam (1993: 12), as she best captures the writers' belief regarding CL, by stating:

'Cooperative learning, to be used most effectively, should be applied to all levels of the educational ecosystem; including cooperative groups of learners, cooperation and teaming among teachers, and cooperation with families and the broader community. (...) There are other useful highly compatible forms of instruction. Cooperative learning should not be seen as a panacea for solving all the problems of our schools, but it is a sound technique for structuring a responsive education community.'

As we approach the 21st century, and move towards an increasingly diverse society, the challenges for teaching with appropriate methodologies that address this diversity also increase. CL is called to be one of the methodologies for the diversity of the years to come, in which collaborative dialogue should be seen as a first step for addressing the challenges and satisfaction of teaching and learning within that diversity. In like manner, the process of collaborative dialogue is a widespread triumph in itself.

Notes

[1] However, in Europe, French Pedagogue Célestin Freinet (1896-1966) spent his whole life teaching in small rural elementary schools in the south of France. Freinet pioneered an international movement for radical educational reform through cooperative learning. Freinet's 'Modern School Movement' has provided the network through which a broad community of teachers have come to know his remarkable variety of innovative classroom techniques, derived first and foremost from his own work as a teacher in the 1920s and 1930s. Much of his pedagogy seems every bit as fresh and relevant today as it was in his own time: the importance of creative and useful work for children's learning and close observation of how they do it; a direct appreciation for the natural world; a commitment to developing appropriate technologies for the how they learn; and strong emphasis on linking school and community with the wider issues of social justice and political action (see, e.g., Clandfield and Sivell, 1990).

[2] James A. Banks (likewise Sonia Nieto and others) prefer writing the word 'white' with capital letters (as well as Black, Latino, etc.). The writers will observe this pattern in the paper. However, we will use small letters when done so by other scholars.

[3] Spain has 17 autonomous regions (or Autonomous Communities). Each of them is ruled by Statutory Law and has its own Parliament and Government. Among these autonomous regions are Galicia, Catalonia (or Catalunya), and the so-called Basque Country (or Euskadi), and each has a special treatment in law. Therefore, the co-official languages with Spanish (or Castillian) are: Galician (Galego), Catalan (Català), and Basque (Euskera), respectively. These co-official languages are taught as first languages in Galician, Catalan and Basque schools.

[4] Gonzalo and Villanueva (1996) estimated the number of foreigners living in Spain to be 800,000 (about 2% of the total population); half from the Developing World (especially from African countries, mainly Morocco), and half from European countries or North America, mainly retired people living in the south and south east coasts of Spain. Official statistics from December 1996 confirm this estimate. The writers believe that in December 1998 around 1,000,000 foreigners will be living in Spain, including those who enter Spain 'illegally' or 'irregularly' too (about 2,5% of the total population).

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