Develop learning communities to accelerate academic and social outcomes

This is one of a series of cases that illustrate the findings of the best evidence syntheses (BESs). Each is designed to support the professional learning of educators, leaders and policy makers.
BES cases: Insight into what works

The best evidence syntheses (BESs) bring together research evidence about ‘what works’ for diverse (all) learners in education. Recent BESs each include a number of cases that describe actual examples of professional practice and then analyse the findings. These cases support educators to grasp the big ideas behind effective practice at the same time as they provide vivid insight into their application.

Building as they do on the work of researchers and educators, the cases are trustworthy resources for professional learning.

Using the BES cases

The BES cases overview provides a brief introduction to each of the cases. It is designed to help you quickly decide which case or cases could be helpful in terms of your particular improvement priorities.

Use the cases with colleagues as catalysts for reflecting on your own professional practice and as starting points for delving into other sources of information, including related sections of the BESs. To request copies of the source studies, use the Research Behind the BES link on the BES website.

The conditions for effective professional learning are described in the Teacher Professional Learning and development BES and condensed into the ten principles found in the associated International Academy of Education summary (Timperley, 2008).

Note that, for the purpose of this series, the cases have been re-titled to more accurately signal their potential usefulness.

Responsiveness to diverse (all) learners

The different BESs consistently find that any educational improvement initiative needs to be responsive to the diverse learners in the specific context. Use the inquiry and knowledge-building cycle tool to design a collaborative approach to improvement that is genuinely responsive to your learners.

Develop learning communities to accelerate academic and social outcomes

Different approaches can influence student participation and relationships in positive or negative ways. This case explains how a teacher and his students created a highly productive classroom learning community. The students learned and used social skills that supported their academic learning, their metacognitive skills, and their respect and care for each other. The case explores the impact on particular Māori, Pasifika, Iraqi, and Pākehā students.

Classes that become effective learning communities can accelerate achievement because they intensify learning opportunities and supports for every student.

See also BES Exemplar 1: Developing communities of mathematical inquiry and BES Case 24: Expect students to be accountable for thinking through the mathematics involved in a problem.

**Introduction**

The researcher believed that, for students to learn how to participate in society, they need opportunities to take on real roles and responsibilities in the classroom. When she shared her sociocultural ideas with the teacher in this case (Rhys), the two began a journey of collaborative action-research in which his practice, based for the most part on a one-sided pedagogy, came to incorporate practice based on a pedagogy of joint participation. His changed perspective on teaching/learning and the resulting shifts in the practice led to significant advances in the conceptual understandings of his learners, in their ability to participate together, and in their identities as intentional learners. For Rhys and his class, social studies was no longer about preparing for future participation: it was about embedding learning; in the here-and-now community of their own classroom.

Rhys came to understand that you can’t teach children about social participation – they have to live it.

**Targeted learning outcome/s**

Rhys’s class was working on a social studies unit based on the concepts ‘culture and heritage’ and ‘social organisation’. His aim was for his students to develop conceptual understandings about ‘community’, ‘roles’, and ‘responsibilities’ as they related to the classroom context.

Rhys also wanted to progress the broader aims of social studies as they relate to participation in society: he wanted his students to be involved in making decisions about and sharing responsibility for learning in their classroom. Pursuing these broad aims, he supported his students as they made the transition from passive recipients of knowledge to active supporters of each other’s learning, and as they learned to build on each other’s ideas to create new understandings.

**Learner/s and learning context**

**One teacher learner**

- Rhys, team leader, 35-year-old Pākehā male in third year of teaching at decile 3 full primary school.

**Thirty year 3 and 4 learners**

Four case study students:
- Sakura, female, Iraqi
- Era, female, Māori
- Ikanı, male, Sāmoan
- Caleb, male, Pākehā.

As part of the dialogic processes of collaborative action-research, Rhys questioned some of his taken-for-granted perspectives on learning and teaching:

**Pedagogy**

**Initial perspective**

- “I’m the boss … I make the decisions.”
- “I decide the learning directions.”
- “My class is not a democracy.”
- “Teachers are in the hot seat.”
- “Teaching is all down to me … it’s my responsibility.”

Rhys thought about teaching as planning, organising, and doing activities.

**End-of-year perspective**

- “I work with children.”
- “[Learning is about] valuing each other.”
- “I’ve really been open and … devolved power to everyone.”
- “[It’s about] actually listening to each other.”

Rhys thought about teaching as a learning relationship with children, where there is mutual trust and power sharing.
As his perspective changed, Rhys worked on shifting his practice – from one-sided to joint participation.

**Characteristics of one-sided pedagogy**

1. **Cognitive dominance**
   Rhys was transmitting information or arranging activities for his students to do and acquire ideas from. Either he or his students were active: they weren’t active together.

2. **Social control**
   Rhys held the power and made all decisions about the directions and processes of learning.

3. **Emotional distance**
   While Rhys made many emotional connections with students, there were no explicit rituals or forums for sharing and respecting each other’s emotional responses.

4. **Physical disconnection**
   Rhys positioned himself in ways that physically separated him from the students.

**Characteristics of joint participation**

1. **Cognitive connection**

2. **Social connection**

3. **Emotional connection**

4. **Physical connection**

As Rhys’s class established itself as a community of learners, a culture of learning developed that was not confined to social studies. The outcomes summarised below were evident across the curriculum.

1. **Conceptual understandings**

   The success of the approach can be seen in the way in which a group of students co-constructed an analogy for ‘community’:

   *A community is like a jigsaw, it has pieces…*
   *Each piece relates to another piece…*
   *The pieces are people…*
   *You need to learn off other people…*
   *The pieces connect together to make the community…*
   *You can make your own puzzle/community…*
   *People bring skills, feelings, and attitudes to their community…*
   *The glue is communication and the connections between people in the community.*

2. **Learning identities: metacognitive and affective outcomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspectives of learning (metacognitive outcomes, p. 126)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initial perspectives</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sakura</td>
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<td>Ikani</td>
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<td>Caleb</td>
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<td>Era</td>
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3. Participatory outcomes

Sakura went from preferring to work alone to initiating joint participation and valuing the product that came from learning together.

Era went from participating as a reproducer of information to participating as a learner intent on creating new ideas with others.

Caleb went from holding on to his ideas in the belief that to share them was cheating to realising that sharing ideas was a way to learn.

Ikani originally positioned himself as a captive in the classroom (where “you did this learning stuff”). He became a learner who recognised that he had expertise to share.
## Developing joint participation in a community of learners

### Cognitive dominance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhys was:</th>
<th>Cognitive connection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• telling information;</td>
<td>Rhys:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• arranging activities;</td>
<td>• invited students to contribute their ideas about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• focusing on finishing tasks;</td>
<td>learning goals;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• giving instructions;</td>
<td>• modelled how to respond to someone else's thinking</td>
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<td>• asking his questions;</td>
<td>so that ideas were listened to, built upon, and</td>
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<tr>
<td>• judging outcomes.</td>
<td>challenged (dovetailing);</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• provided opportunities for students to dovetail their</td>
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<td>ideas to form new ideas together;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• positioned himself as a learner with the students.</td>
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</table>

### Social control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhys was:</th>
<th>Social connection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• making all planning decisions;</td>
<td>Rhys:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• taking sole responsibility for managing behaviour and learning;</td>
<td>• made learning decisions with the students;</td>
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<td>• holding all the power.</td>
<td>• wrote learning intentions and success criteria with</td>
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<td>students;</td>
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<td>• shared responsibility for managing behaviour –</td>
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<td>created space for dialogue about behavioural issues;</td>
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<td>• gave opportunities for students to negotiate aspects</td>
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<td>of their learning as it progressed;</td>
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<td>• provided forums for students to share and reflect</td>
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<td>together on their new learning.</td>
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### Student voices (responding to the researcher’s question)

- **Rhys’s voice**
  “Let’s sit down and talk about that.”
  “I agree with that …”
  “But I think …”
  “I’d like to pick up on …”

- **Student voices**
  - Era: “It’s because so that um …”
  - Ikani: “… It’s so you can um learn …”
  - Era: “… learn about community …”
  - Ikani: “… and about people
  - Era: “… so that you knew you were in a community … the whole class actually made it …
  - Ikani: “… just like a puzzle …
  - Sakura: “We all share ideas about … how you are unique and where you need everyone to give ideas.

- **Caleb**
  He’s given us choices instead of saying “Do this, do that”…
  He doesn’t force us to do things … I’m happy because someone is actually paying attention to what we want to do instead of just doing their own thing.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional distance</th>
<th>Emotional connection</th>
<th>Physical disconnection</th>
<th>Physical connection</th>
<th>Student voices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhys:</td>
<td>Rhys:</td>
<td>Rhys:</td>
<td>Student voices:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• valued students for who they were and cared deeply about making a difference in their lives;</td>
<td>• established rituals where he and the students could share their out-of-school lives;</td>
<td>• sat in his ‘teacher’s chair’, facing the students;</td>
<td>• let go of the teaching space (he got out of his chair);</td>
<td>Caleb:  Rhys is like an open book … You know what he is thinking.</td>
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<td>• believed in relational-based teaching;</td>
<td>• talked explicitly about what it means to be a respectful listener;</td>
<td>• stood while students sat beneath him;</td>
<td>• positioned himself at children’s level by kneeling, lying, or sitting with them;</td>
<td>Ikani:  We feel comfortable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• but kept an emotional distance from the students, excluding them from knowing him in his different roles.</td>
<td>• valued students’ honesty and openness about what was going on in the classroom;</td>
<td>• enforced out-of-bounds spaces;</td>
<td>• allowed spaces that had previously been deemed out-of-bounds to be opened up as learning spaces for all;</td>
<td>Sakura:  He cares about us when we are sick or we done wrong.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• valued the diversity of expertise that learners brought to the classroom;</td>
<td>• at mat time, had students sit facing him.</td>
<td>• sat in a circle with the students so that everyone could see each other.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Rhys used a daily ritual, ‘What’s on Top?’, in which he and the students sat in a circle and had the opportunity to share an event or an issue from their out-of-school lives. It was a genuine and honest sharing of their minds and hearts in response to tragedy, joy, or mundane events. What’s on Top? often began with Rhys or a student saying “Let’s catch up on each other.”

Student voices:
- Caleb:  Rhys is like an open book … You know what he is thinking.
- Ikani:  We feel comfortable.
- Sakura:  He cares about us when we are sick or we done wrong.
## How the learning occurred

### Connection
*Make connections to students’ lives*

Rituals such as What’s on Top? provided a forum in which students and the teacher could hear about each other’s lives. By listening to students (rather than deciding what to teach and then letting the students know), the teacher had insight into their lives and, as a result, could ensure that the content of learning was relevant to them.

### Alignment
*Align experiences to important outcomes*

While the study was centred around the classroom as a learning community, the impact of this particular mechanism is also apparent. The teacher modelled a number of participation modes to support the learners with developing their own participatory skills. He modelled, for example, how to dovetail conversations, so that his students could learn how to talk to each other in ways that would build shared knowledge. By embedding learning about community deep within the programme instead of restricting it to dedicated social studies time, the teacher ensured that the students were repeatedly engaging with the concept.

Alignment between pedagogy and student outcomes is also apparent in the teacher’s shift from a focus on ‘doing’ to a focus on ‘learning’. This shift, aligned with the goals he had for his learners, led to a corresponding shift of emphasis for the students – from ‘finishing activities’ to thinking and talking about ‘learning’.

### Community
*Build and sustain a learning community*

The comparison of one-sided and joint participation pedagogies on page 274 shows how the development of cognitive, social-emotional, and physical connections in all learners, including the teacher, supported shifts in student achievement and participation.

This research highlights the role of sensitive, caring relationships focused on learning. The researcher noted a link between student learning and the honest expression of feelings and valuing of each other’s expertise. In Rhys’s classroom, she saw acts of compassion, sacrifice, humility, and loving kindness that contributed to a climate in which learning could flourish (2006b, p. 132).

This research also highlights the importance of sharing power in learning relationships:

> When teachers vested authority in children to address their own inquiry questions, and when they guided their attempts to do so, some children in the present study came to view learning as more than searching for other people’s knowledge, it came to be about ‘sharing their minds’ with their peers, their teachers and outsiders to create new knowledge (p. 220).

Further, the study shows the potential for learning when dialogue is given a central place in social studies – there were ongoing opportunities for students to share their ideas with each other and to reflect on their own learning.

## Implications for pedagogy

The findings illustrate the importance of teachers and students learning together in joint participation models where both contribute support and direction to shared activities. In a community of learners, students not only construct conceptual understandings about social studies but also develop identities as intentional learners and learn responsive and caring ways of relating to others. Before trying to establish joint participation pedagogies, teachers should first question their own taken-for-granted perspectives on teaching and learning. This re-evaluation is a prerequisite for the paradigm shift necessary to understand and develop the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical reciprocities characteristic of communities of learners.

The sociocultural approach provides a different way of thinking about teaching practice and how young people learn. If it is true that learning is embedded in the social and cultural context, then it is our professional responsibility as teachers to distinguish between one-sided and joint participation models and to develop new pedagogical practices in which the historical boundaries between teachers and students are removed.
The evidence presented in this case can be used to inform teachers’ inquiries into their own practice.

**Focusing inquiry**
What is most important and therefore worth spending time on?

**Teaching inquiry**
What might work best? What could I try?

**Learning inquiry**
What happened? Why did it happen?

Suggested questions:

- Can you identify instances of reciprocity in a recent lesson? How might you have enhanced the cognitive, social, and emotional connections with your learners?
- How might one of your lowest or highest-achieving students perceive your pedagogy – as one-sided or joint participation?
- Identify the students in your class who you know would most benefit from joint participation pedagogy. What learning needs do they have that you are not currently addressing?
- What barriers might you face in providing opportunities for your students to participate together as a community of learners?
- How might others (students, parents, teachers) perceive the introduction of joint participation strategies in your classroom? How might you talk with them about those perceptions?