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TEACHERS AND CHILDREN LEARNING TOGETHER: DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS IN A PRIMARY CLASSROOM

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Education
at Massey University

Alison Mary Sewell

2006
My thesis is dedicated to Olivia

Born 25 May 2006
ABSTRACT

This study investigates the development of a community of learners by observing the changes in teachers’ and children’s participation in four Year 3 / 4 classrooms. The study also explores the teachers’ and children’s perspectives of learning and teaching and the impact of these on the development of a community of learners. Factors enabling and constraining this developmental process are also identified. These research foci respond to a synthesis of research revealing the importance of teachers and children learning together in cohesive learning communities (Alton-Lee, 2003); a sociocultural approach that is uncommon in New Zealand primary classrooms.

Sociocultural theory also informs the generation, analysis and presentation of data. Participant observations, sustained conversations and interviews with the teachers and target children were used to generate data across three cycles of collaborative action research over one school year. Analyses of these data were made by observing the teachers’ and the children’s transformation of participation through Rogoff’s (2003) personal, interpersonal and institutional lenses. The results of this analysis process are presented according to the lens through which the transformation was observed.

The findings showed a community of learners as comprising reciprocal connections across cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual and physical dimensions. Transformations of the teachers’ and the children’s participation in these five reciprocal connections were observed as evidence that a community of learners was developing. These new forms of participation in the classroom shaped, and were shaped by, new identities as learners and teachers, new perspectives about learning and teaching, as well as new culturally authorised values and practices for learning together. Multiple factors constrained the development of a community of learners. The most pervasive constraint was the persistence of teachers’ and children’s traditional perspectives that prevented understanding of the reciprocity and responsivity of shared activity. A range of factors also enabled the development of a community of learners. The opportunity for professional dialogue in this collaborative action research most enabled the teachers’ to develop a community of learners in the classroom: the opportunity for guided participation with teachers and peers in shared classroom activity most enabled the children to learn together.

These findings reveal the demanding, complex and mutually constituting nature of developing a community of learners in a primary classroom. The transformation of participation observed in this study provides evidence of the positive contributions sociocultural theory can make to both teachers’ and to children’s learning. Implications based on these findings are considered for teachers, children, researchers and education providers who together share responsibility for developing and sustaining a community of learners as accepted instructional practice in primary classrooms.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?
Yes, to the very end.
Will the day’s journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend.
(Christina Rossetti)

The expertise, wisdom and love of many people enabled me to write this thesis.

I am very grateful to my supervisors, Professor Joy Cullen and Dr Alison St George for their insightful guidance and support. Their expertise about sociocultural theory, practice and research inspired me to begin this journey: their searching questions and thoughtful reflections raised over many stretching sessions challenged me to complete the journey.

I was privileged to have been included in the teaching lives of Rick, Amy, Tiare and Kelly. Thank you for showing me your trust and respect as we learned together about collaborative research and about developing a community of learners. We did indeed, stand on each other’s shoulders as we came to acknowledge and share the expertise we each brought to this research.

I also owe thanks to the children who welcomed me as another adult in their school lives. I learned so much from your experiences of learning. At the beginning of the research you asked me “are you doing your research?” by the end, you were asking the questions and researching with me.

My deep gratitude goes to many people who appeared in my life just when I needed them. To Don, who still sits on my shoulder gently leading me out of the rapids and into shallow waters, thank you for your reassurance and guidance. To Ian, grazie for reading drafts of each chapter and for helping me to see the beauty of a well constructed sentence. To my prayer group friends, thank you for keeping me on the beam, for your loving acts of kindness and the sunflowers while I battled the more up-hill parts of this journey. And to my work friends, thank you for your encouragement, humour and honesty shared on the stairs, in the tearoom or over breakfast.

Mum and Dad, you would be proud to know that I have finally finished. Becky, Cameron and Sophie, thank you for your patience that stretched over five years as I worked on my “upstairs” thesis. And Peter, thank you for believing in me and for reassuring me that, one day, I would make it all the way to the very end.

I can do all things in Him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13)
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................ i
Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................... ii
Table of Contents ....................................................................................................... iii
List of Tables ............................................................................................................. vi
List of Figures ........................................................................................................... vii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY ........................................ 1
1.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................... 1
1.2 Research Aims and Context ............................................................................. 2
1.3 Justification for this Research .......................................................................... 4
1.4 My Personal History ....................................................................................... 6
1.5 Thesis Overview ............................................................................................... 7

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ......................................... 9
2.1 Introduction ....................................................................................................... 9
2.2 The Roots of Sociocultural Theory ................................................................. 9
2.3 Contemporary Theories of Learning ............................................................... 12
2.4 Learning in Everyday Settings ......................................................................... 18
2.5 Learning in Classroom Settings ...................................................................... 21
2.6 Learning in a Community of Learners ........................................................... 24
2.7 Critical Issues ................................................................................................. 36
2.8 Chapter Summary ............................................................................................ 41

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY IN THEORY ...................................... 43
3.1 Introduction ..................................................................................................... 43
3.2 Research Questions ......................................................................................... 44
3.3 Research Paradigm ......................................................................................... 44
3.4 Action Research Methodology ........................................................................ 47
3.5 Data Generation Methods .............................................................................. 57
3.6 Data Analysis .................................................................................................. 61
CHAPTER EIGHT: LEARNING TOGETHER AS A COMMUNITY .......... 207
8.1 Introduction .............................................................................................. 207
8.2 Reciprocal Connections in a Community of Learners ....................... 208
8.3 Children’s New Learning Identities ........................................................... 219
8.4 The Impact of Teachers’ Perspectives ....................................................... 224
8.5 The Impact of Children’s Perspectives ....................................................... 230
8.6 Teachers Need Community to Develop Community ............................... 233
8.7 Children Need Guidance to Learn Together ............................................. 241
8.8. Chapter Summary ..................................................................................... 244

CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS ..................... 247
9.1 Introduction ............................................................................................... 247
9.2 Conclusions ............................................................................................... 248
9.3 Contributions to Knowledge .................................................................... 251
9.4 Implications for Developing a Community of Learners ......................... 253
9.5 Further Research ....................................................................................... 259
9.6 Reflections on my use of the Methodology ............................................. 261
9.7 Final Words ............................................................................................... 263

REFERENCES ................................................................................................. 267

APPENDICES ................................................................................................. 291

Appendix A: Ethical procedures
Appendix A1: Information Sheet inviting participation from Board of Trustees
Appendix A2: Consent Form for Board of Trustees
Appendix A3: Information Sheet inviting participation from the teachers
Appendix A4: Consent Form for teachers
Appendix A5: Gaining educated consent from children
Appendix A6: Information Sheet inviting participation from children
Appendix A6a: Child-friendly pamphlet inviting children’s participation
Appendix A7: Consent Form for children
Appendix A8: Information Sheet for parents/carer
Appendix A9: Consent Form for parents/carer
Appendix A10: Consent Form for transcriber agreeing to confidentiality

Appendix B: Fieldnote and transcript exemplars
Appendix B1: Fieldnote CO 42 from Room Four
Appendix B2: Semi-structured interview with the retiring principal
Appendix B3: Semi-structured interview schedule for target children
Appendix B4: Interview transcript with Jonah, Michelle and Zac
Appendix B5: Semi-structured interview schedule for teachers in March
Appendix B6: Semi-structured interview schedule for teachers in December
Appendix B7: Semi-structured interview with the new principal
Appendix B8: Diagram to stimulate talk about a community of learners
Appendix B9: Excerpt of discussion from RaP 4
Appendix B10: Feedback to Rick prior to RaP 3
Appendix B11: Agendas for first, second, third and fourth RaP days

Appendix C: Data analysis
Appendix C1: NVivo document showing colour coding
Appendix C2: Table analysing features of a community of learners

LIST OF TABLES
Table 2.1: Sociocultural principles underpinning reviewed learning communities 36
Table 3.1: Sociocultural principles underpinning action research ....................... 50
Table 4.1: Description of the data sources .......................................................... 71
Table 4.2: Details of participants across the four classrooms ............................... 76
Table 4.3: Comparing a community of learners and collaborative action research 85
Table 4.4: Summary of shared values for learning together in the research .......... 86
Table 4.5: Summary of the data generation methods ........................................... 89
Table 4.6: Nature of transformations observed through three analytic lenses ...... 92
Table 4.7: Overview of the study ....................................................................... 95
Table 5.1: Rick’s professional development goals ............................................. 101
Table 5.2: Summary of one-sided instructional models ................................. 105
Table 5.3: Summary of joint participation instructional models ......................... 108
Table 5.4: Shifts in Rick’s perspectives of learning and teaching ..................... 125
Table 5.5: Target children’s perspectives of learning .................................... 126
Table 5.6: Target children’s perspectives of teaching ..................................... 126
Table 6.1: Amy’s perspectives of learning and teaching .............................. 145
Table 6.2: Tiare’s perspectives of learning and teaching .............................. 159
Table 6.3: Kelly’s perspectives of learning and teaching .............................. 172
Table 7.1: Factors constraining teachers ...................................................... 180
Table 7.2: Factors constraining children ..................................................... 188
Table 7.3: Factors enabling teachers ............................................................ 193
Table 7.4: Factors enabling children ............................................................ 200
Table 8.1: Key findings of the study ............................................................. 208
Table 8.2: Initial and clarified principles of a community of learners .......... 229

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: An illustration of one-sided instructional models ......................... 2
Figure 8.1: A conceptual model of a community of learners ......................... 218
Figure 8.2 Observations of effective professional development ....................... 240