Scaffolding social and emotional learning within 'shared affective spaces' to reduce bullying: A sociocultural perspective

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ABSTRACT

A sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978) framed the qualitative study, to understand how to create 'shared affective spaces' as an enabling factor to scaffold within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Social and emotional learning is conceptualised as a social concept, focusing on the collective knowledge of the peer group. The longitudinal study was conducted with thirty-one students 9-10 years of age in a composite Year 4/5 classroom. There were 17 students in the Year 5 cohort drawn from sixty students distributed across four similar classes to cope with volume of antisocial behaviour. The teacher/researcher implemented sociocultural strategies such as the weekly class meetings to scaffold students to make connections with their emotions and the impact of bullying behaviour on the perpetrators and victims. Rogoff's (1995) analytical planes frame the discussion of students' participation and the case study of Lindsay, a Year 5 student who was a bully. Lindsay's journey exemplifies the positive outcomes for teacher scaffolding of understandings about making friends and prosocial behaviour to reduce bullying, using holistic classroom practices that made explicit the affective aspects of learning. Future research is required to develop teachers' expertise in understanding the scaffolding process to enlist students' emotions as an enabling factor.

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1. Introduction

Schools are recognised as places of academic learning but also a context for social and emotional development. Bullying is a pervasive issue in schools and the negative repercussions can be enduring into adulthood (Rigby, 2007). Early intervention and supporting social and emotional development assists students to reach their academic potential (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). As the peer group constitutes one of the most important contexts for child development and socialization and is critical in the formulation of values and social norms for behaviour (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996; Lovat, Dally, Clement, & Toomey, 2011; Lovat, Toomey, Clement, Crotty, & Nielsen, 2009; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006; Wentzel, 2005) it is appropriate to consider the peer group when addressing bullying. Children are in a vulnerable position to become the victims of bullying when there is an inequality of power amongst peers on a physical, verbal or psychological level (Slee, 2003), accompanied by a deliberate intent to repeatedly harm (Spears, Slee, Owens, & Johnson, 2009). If children do not develop positive peer relationships they are more likely to experience social and emotional problems (Ladd & Burgess, 1999) such as loneliness, a low self-esteem or behave aggressively (Schmidt, Demulder, & Denham, 2002). Limited social and emotional development affects a child's ability to collaborate and learn effectively with peers (Boyd, Barnett, Bodrova, Leong, & Gomby, 2005; Ladd et al., 1996).

Many research studies conceptualise social and emotional learning primarily as an individual endeavour (Elias, 2006; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007; Zins & Elias, 2007). Anti-bullying programs often focus on the perpetrators and victims

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(Bernard, 1996; Cross, 2010) while ignoring the peer group. However, in the current research bullying is conceptualised as a social issue and the collective knowledge of the peer group is viewed as critical to developing prosocial behaviour. The classroom teacher, who was also the researcher, scaffolded students with questions about their behaviour and feelings to foreground the affective elements of learning. Recognising the emotional aspect of classroom research is an area that is often neglected by researchers (Goldstein & Freedman, 2003; Meyer & Turner, 2002, 2006) but it is considered as an enabling factor in scaffolding (Bruner, 1986; Goldstein, 1999; Renshaw, 2013; Rogoff, 1995, 2003). This paper examines scaffolding social and emotional learning by creating 'shared affective spaces' (Goldstein & Freedman, 2003) that supported students' ability to adopt prosocial behaviour. The notion of zone of proximal development (ZPD), scaffolding and 'shared affective spaces' (Goldstein, 1999) is discussed next to elucidate the links between the sociocultural activities in the classroom and developing student empathy. Later Rogoff's (1995, 2003) planes provide an analytical framework to discuss the classroom activities that promoted prosocial behaviour.

2. Sociocultural theoretical framework

Vygotsky's (1978) unique perspective of human development and learning emphasises the social, interpersonal and interactional nature of cognitive development. Thus, sociocultural theory is appropriate to conceptualise social and emotional learning as a social concept to reflect the shared cultural knowledge of students and teacher/researcher in the classroom. Vygotsky (1978) believed that the purpose of education is to pass on cultural tools such as language to enable children to think clearly and creatively and develop self-confidence in their abilities to express their point of view.

They begin to plan and organise their own activities, openly express their point of view, provide non-standard solutions for problems, interact freely with other people and, most importantly, believe in themselves and their own abilities. (Doyla, 2010)

Vygotsky's (1978) proposition was that any higher psychological function appears twice, on two planes. Firstly, on the social plane between people (interpsychological) and secondly, on the individual plane (intrapsychological) when the child internalises their learning. Parents and teachers provide the cultural tools for children to access their culture during social interaction. The learner is embedded within the cultural activities of the classroom, family and wider community and learns to make sense of their world but also contribute their ideas. The ZPD is characterised as "the distance between actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD defines the higher mental functions that are in the process of maturation, suggesting changing mental functions that happen over time. Sociocultural activities within the ZPD are where Vygotsky (1978) asserts true learning occurs, providing opportunities for children to internalise higher psychological functions. Goldstein's (1999) and Noddings (1984) research on 'affect' and 'caring' are discussed in the next section in relation to the affective characteristics of the ZPD to focus on scaffolding the emotional aspect of cognitive development.

3. Scaffolding within shared affective spaces

The original term of 'scaffolding' is drawn from the research of Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) and is applied in this paper to the notion of working in the ZPD as "problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Goldstein (1999) further argues that emotions and relationships are integral to working effectively within the ZPD which is encapsulated in the term "interrelational" zone. This zone is the "shared affective space created by the adult and child in the ZPD" (Goldstein, 1999, p. 651). Goldstein (1999) postulates that caring relationships (Noddings, 1984) are a prerequisite for teachers and students to work within the ZPD. Noddings (1984) use of the term 'care' identifies specific roles for the person giving care (one-caring) and a person receiving care (cared-for). The one-caring agrees to provide their full attention and is receptive to the perspective and situation of the one-cared. In the current research the teacher/researcher's role is to create shared affective spaces (Goldstein (1999) that establish a 'duality' with the learner where the one-caring sees and feels as the cared for does (Noddings, 1984, p.30). As this process requires a focus on interpersonal relationships it is important to choose research methods that allow participants to freely express their views and feeling.

4. Qualitative research methodology

The classroom activities were purposely chosen to scaffold students' metacognitive, social and emotional skills and encourage full participation. The type of data collected was about students' perceptions and feelings about each other. Qualitative research methodology was preferred as a less intrusive and flexible method to understand students' different points of view about their relationships and feelings (Burns, 2000; Grundy, 1995; Richards, 2005; Tripp, 1995). In addition the teacher/researcher used an action research process of 'plan, act and reflect' to organise and facilitate data collection in a systematic way from classroom activities (Burns, 2000; Grundy, 1995; Richards, 2005; Tripp, 1995). Data collection sources included the teacher/researcher's observations and students' reflections which were written in their logs. Semi structured student interviews were conducted using the same open ended questions. Responses were compared to identify emerging themes over the year for the larger study. In this paper the case study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2012) of Lindsay and his peers is used to provide a level of detail about the school and classroom context and the participants' that it is argued is unattainable by any other approach (Rogoff, 1990; Sharp, 2009). The data sources from diverse teaching and research tools are listed in Table 1 below and are further elaborated in the discussion and findings.