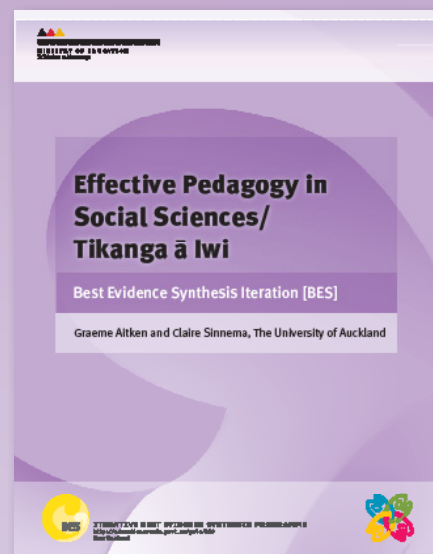


# Develop learning communities to accelerate academic and social outcomes

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

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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.

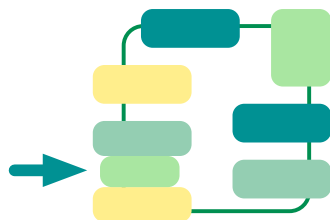
Use the cases with colleagues as catalysts for reflecting on your own professional practice and as starting points for delving into other sources of information, including related sections of the BESs. To request copies of the source studies, use the Research Behind the BES link on the BES website.

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

Use the BES cases and the appropriate curriculum documents to design a response that will improve student outcomes



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.*

## Source

Sewell, A. M. (2006). *Teachers and children learning together: Developing a community of learners in a primary classroom*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North.

## 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
- Ikani, 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.

## Pedagogy

### 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

## Outcomes

Perspectives of learning (metacognitive outcomes, p. 126)		
	Initial perspectives	New perspectives
Sakura	"A good learner is good at <i>finishing</i> things on time and not rushing their work."	"My classmates and the teacher <i>help me learn</i> ... you can <i>share</i> your ideas ... We are all teachers and learners in here!"
Ikani	"A good learner <i>sits up properly</i> and writes properly."	"A good learner sits <i>beside</i> people they can learn with."
Caleb	"A good learner <i>listens</i> very carefully."	"Learning is <i>sharing your mind</i> and stuff."
Era	"A good learner would <i>get on</i> with their work and <i>finish</i> it at the right time."	"The <i>learning intentions</i> are really good to help you <i>learn</i> ."

### 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

Joint participation pedagogy: evidence of reciprocal connections	
<b>One-sided pedagogy</b>	
<b>Cognitive dominance</b>	
<p>Rhys was:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>telling information;</li> <li>arranging activities;</li> <li>focusing on finishing tasks;</li> <li>giving instructions;</li> <li>asking <i>his</i> questions;</li> <li>judging outcomes.</li> </ul>	
<b>Cognitive connection</b>	
<p>Rhys:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>invited students to contribute their ideas about learning goals;</li> <li>modelled how to respond to someone else's thinking so that ideas were listened to, built upon, and challenged (dovetailing);</li> <li>provided opportunities for students to dovetail their ideas to form new ideas together;</li> <li>positioned himself as a learner with the students.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Rhys's voice</b></p> <p>"Let's sit down and talk about that."</p> <p>"I agree with that ..."</p> <p>"But I think ..."</p> <p>"I'd like to pick up on ..."</p>
<b>Social control</b>	
<p>Rhys was:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>making all planning decisions;</li> <li>taking sole responsibility for managing behaviour and learning;</li> <li>holding all the power.</li> </ul>	
<b>Social connection</b>	
<p>Rhys:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>made learning decisions with the students;</li> <li>wrote learning intentions and success criteria with students;</li> <li>shared responsibility for managing behaviour – created space for dialogue about behavioural issues;</li> <li>gave opportunities for students to negotiate aspects of their learning as it progressed;</li> <li>provided forums for students to share and reflect together on their new learning.</li> </ul>	<p>Realising that a new class of five-year-olds was starting at their school, the class wanted to help them develop a sense of belonging to the school community. They decided to co-author a booklet called The Book of Jubilee School. Rhys and the students shared decisions about the content, their responsibilities for developing the book, and how it would be used.</p>
<b>Social control</b>	
<p>Rhys was:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>making all planning decisions;</li> <li>taking sole responsibility for managing behaviour and learning;</li> <li>holding all the power.</li> </ul>	
<b>Social connection</b>	
<p>Rhys:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>invited students to contribute their ideas about learning goals;</li> <li>modelled how to respond to someone else's thinking so that ideas were listened to, built upon, and challenged (dovetailing);</li> <li>provided opportunities for students to dovetail their ideas to form new ideas together;</li> <li>positioned himself as a learner with the students.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student voices</b> (responding to the researcher's question "Why did you make a class quilt?")</p> <p>Era: <i>It's because so that um ...</i></p> <p>Ikani: <i>... It's so you can um learn ...</i></p> <p>Era: <i>... learn about community ...</i></p> <p>Ikani: <i>... and about people</i></p> <p>Era: <i>... so that you knew you were in a community ... the whole class actually made it ...</i></p> <p>Ikani: <i>... just like a puzzle ...</i></p> <p>Sakura: <i>We all share ideas about ... how you are unique and where you need everyone to give ideas.</i></p>
<b>Social control</b>	
<p>Rhys was:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>making all planning decisions;</li> <li>taking sole responsibility for managing behaviour and learning;</li> <li>holding all the power.</li> </ul>	
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<p>Rhys:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>made learning decisions with the students;</li> <li>wrote learning intentions and success criteria with students;</li> <li>shared responsibility for managing behaviour – created space for dialogue about behavioural issues;</li> <li>gave opportunities for students to negotiate aspects of their learning as it progressed;</li> <li>provided forums for students to share and reflect together on their new learning.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student voice</b></p> <p>Caleb:</p> <p><i>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.</i></p>

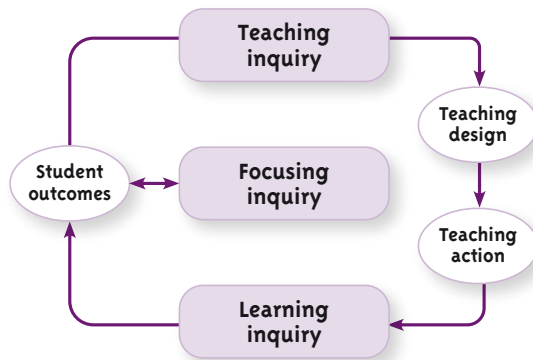
<p><b>Emotional distance</b></p> <p>Rhys:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>valued students for who they were and cared deeply about making a difference in their lives;</li> <li>believed in relational-based teaching;</li> <li><b>but</b> kept an emotional distance from the students, excluding them from knowing him in his different roles.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Emotional connection</b></p> <p>Rhys:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>established rituals where he and the students could share their out-of-school lives;</li> <li>talked explicitly about what it means to be a respectful listener;</li> <li>valued students' honesty and openness about what was going on in the classroom;</li> <li>valued the diversity of expertise that learners brought to the classroom;</li> <li>was open and honest with students about his own life in ways that allowed them to appreciate his different roles.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student voices</b></p> <p>Caleb: <i>Rhys is like an open book ... You know what he is thinking.</i></p> <p>Ikani: <i>We feel comfortable.</i></p> <p>Sakura: <i>He cares about us when we are sick or we done wrong.</i></p>
<p><b>Physical disconnection</b></p> <p>Rhys:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>sat in his 'teacher's chair', facing the students;</li> <li>stood while students sat beneath him;</li> <li>enforced out-of-bounds spaces;</li> <li>at mat time, had students sit facing him.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Physical connection</b></p> <p>Rhys:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>let go of the teaching space (he got out of his chair);</li> <li>positioned himself at children's level by kneeling, lying, or sitting with them;</li> <li>allowed spaces that had previously been deemed out-of-bounds to be opened up as learning spaces for all;</li> <li>sat in a circle with the students so that everyone could see each other.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student voice</b></p> <p>Ikani: <i>It just feels like he is not the head any more ... He is one of us ...</i></p>

How the learning occurred	<p><b>Connection</b></p> <p><i>Make connections to students' lives</i></p>	<p>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.</p>
	<p><b>Alignment</b></p> <p><i>Align experiences to important outcomes</i></p>	<p>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.</p> <p>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'.</p>
	<p><b>Community</b></p> <p><i>Build and sustain a learning community</i></p>	<p>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.</p> <p>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).</p> <p>This research also highlights the importance of sharing power in learning relationships:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">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).</p> <p>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.</p>

Implications for pedagogy	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
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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?