

‘One girl had a different idea’: children’s perspectives on learning and teaching models in the traditional classroom

Eleanore Hargreaves, Dalia Elhawary and Mohamed Mahgoub

Abstract

This paper explores learning from the perspective of primary pupils in Egypt. The article explores models of learning and teaching and how pupils respond to traditional models and to changes within those. Qualitative data was collected from 57 interviews with 81 primary pupils in Alexandria, Egypt. Our research approach was interpretivist and our method was individual interview and observation. Teachers had introduced for the first time the practice of group and/or pair-work in the English language classroom. Following this change, pupils described their learning as benefiting from: peer support; exercising self-direction; participating more actively; and enjoyment of collaborative work. These findings accord with the research literature on collaborative learning. We conclude that even in traditional sites of learning, children appreciate aspects of collaborative learning.

Introduction

In many schools of middle/low-income countries, from Nigeria to Jamaica to Myanmar, the primary classroom is still a place where the teacher transmits information: each pupil listens and writes without sanctioned interaction with other children, often actually in competition with peers. This pedagogic model assumes that other pupils have little valuable to contribute to the learning process and fails to acknowledge the role that creative personal engagement and enjoyment play. This article explores some Egyptian pupils’ perspectives on the influence of the traditional model on English learning, using Egyptian classrooms to represent traditional classes the world over. The paper then investigates children’s

descriptions of working in a humanistic and collaborative way, still within the confines of the traditional classroom, but in a manner that prioritises pupils' social interaction, self-direction and enjoyment as part of inclusive learning (Axline 1947; Cornelius-White 2007; Moore 2013; Rogers 1951; McCombs and Whisler 1997; Sivasubramaniam 2011). This paper describes children's perspectives about learning English collaboratively with peers in groups or pairs, including their suggestions that each individual contributes to the learning process, competition is reduced and empathy and enjoyment encouraged. The purpose of this paper is to explore learning from the perspective of primary pupils who have traditionally experienced classroom learning predominantly as 'being taught'.

We draw on research from two research projects in eight disadvantaged primary schools in Alexandria, Egypt, where English is highly valued as an interactive global language but rarely taught interactively in schools. This research is innovative in three key ways. Firstly, it focuses on a middle-income, ex-colonial country where very little qualitative data is collected or published about primary schools (Camfield, Crivello, & Woodhead 2009). Secondly, it investigates voices of primary pupils, whose views are systematically disregarded within many traditional systems and yet are potentially illuminating (Cook-Sather 2009). Thirdly, it explores factors that encourage or obstruct humanistic, relationally-focused teaching approaches within the traditional classroom, a research focus that has rarely been addressed.

In the next section the Egyptian context is described, as it relates to the issues presented here. In the subsequent two sections, we explore models of learning and teaching. We compare extant research into the different experiences of pupils who learn within traditional pedagogies and those whose classrooms are more humanistically and relationally

attuned. Then we explore models of teaching, to untangle “traditional” and “humanistic” tendencies.

Historico-geographical context of traditional teaching models in Egypt

The traditional pedagogic model has been dominant for thousands of years (Watkins 2005) and is still common in many low/middle-income countries today as well as increasingly in some higher income countries such as England. This model of schooling was introduced or reinforced in numerous countries subjugated by Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries. Many of these have only become independent in the past century, for example, parts of the Caribbean, several Middle Eastern countries, diverse African countries, India, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore. Similarly, Egypt was under British governance from 1882 until 1952. Under British control, Egyptian schooling was overhauled specifically: ‘... to refashion graduates as administrators in the colonial bureaucracy and even to reduce the risk that potentially disruptive, educated, nationalist leaders might emerge to challenge the occupation’ (Loveluck 2012, 4). In other words, under foreign subjugators, the political nature of schooling as a means of *control* was highlighted. Control, rather than development, emerged as the goal of schooling.

In stark contrast, in England during the 1960s and 1970s, primary education started in some parts to encourage the nurturing of more critical, socially aware individuals who might radically change society through social interaction; as well as participate more fully in existing society (Dann 2012). This development was accompanied by less formal, more humanistic modes of operation within post-war England (Wouters 2009). Although these shifts were partial and their benefits disputed by the right wing of government (Ball 2012), the inclusion of more humanistic principles was indisputable. In contrast, social changes in

Egypt, as in many ex-British colonies, were different from in England, and the traditional, formal approaches to primary education were substantially sustained in Egyptian government schools, although less so in the burgeoning private sector in Egypt (Loveluck 2012). Some authors suggest that the more formal approach has been sustained in Egypt partly because beliefs about the individual's role in society are 'diametrically opposed to Western or at least mainstream US assumptions' (Atkinson 1977 in Ab Kadir 2017, 242). Pratt (2007) suggested that this diametric opposition was a *result* of previous subjugation. Thereby, as in similar nations, in Egypt there has lingered 'a deeply entrenched culture of obedience and conformity... that compels the rights and privileges of the larger society over the individual' (Ab Kadir 2017, 237). These assumptions tend to conflict with humanistic approaches to classrooms, where the individual's originality and potential to make change on everyone's behalf may be more highly valued than conformity. Pressure to conform rather than diversify has also been exacerbated in Egypt since 1952 by the extremely competitive and unchallenged "monster" of the secondary leaving certificate, success in which has determined future lives in a highly restrictive way (Hargreaves, 1997).

The need for this research within the current situation in Egypt

This article explores how primary pupils experienced and perceived the traditional classroom, in contrast to a collaborative classroom which displayed more humanistic pedagogy. It investigates how certain children in the traditional classroom perceived learning there and whether, and if so how, they perceived scope for more social interaction and more self-direction even *within* the traditional classroom. It asks, what happened to pupils' English learning when they were guided to explore more self-directed and

relationship-based learning processes? And what role, if any, did enjoyment play in these novel approaches?

The need to explore this topic is urgent in Egyptian government schools, because, despite recent policy emphasis on English learning, pupils are not mastering English to the degree desired by government and by pupils themselves (Hargreaves, Mahgoub and ElHawary 2016; McCloskey, Orr, & Dolitsky 2006). The Egyptian Ministry of Education seems to be prioritising the education of the richer elites over and above mass education among the 100 million or so people inhabiting Egypt. State education has undergone a series of reforms but government schools remain desirable only to families who cannot afford private schools (Loveluck 2012). Government schools are subject to large class-sizes, poor equipment, teacher absenteeism, poor teacher salaries and a lack of professional development opportunities (Herrera and Torres 2006). In these conditions, change can prove difficult, despite the best efforts of reformers.

Models of learning

The traditional classroom embodies a thin model of learning, whereby learning is conceptualised as 'being taught' (Watkins 2005). This means that the focus for students is on receiving and retaining facts and sometimes understanding these. The model has been described in the Singaporean context as the source of learners' 'trained incapacity' (Ab Kadir 2017, 229). For example, in terms of learning English as a foreign language, in that model, learning could be seen as acquisition of grammar rules and vocabulary but *not* interacting creatively and socially in English. This thin learning model results partly from a pre-global-media era when information was hard to access and local experts were needed in specific disciplines. This contrasts with today, where knowledge sources abound and access to the global information network is easy via digital media. In tandem with this, formality in

society, even in teaching contexts, has decreased in some countries like England, breaking down the idea that the teacher is the only authority in the classroom and emphasizing the social and personal experiences of students (Cornelius-White 2007; Wouters 2009).

Scholarship on learning in the past century, however, as well as children's narratives, have evidenced that the traditional conception of learning as 'being taught' is inadequate for theorising complex learning such as learning to interact in another language (Hargreaves, Elhawary and Mahgoub 2016; Cornelius-White 2007; Illeris 2007; Sfard 1998; Watkins 2005). Vygotsky's learning theories, in particular, have foregrounded the theoretical shift in some countries towards more interactive, more relational, more person-centred models of classrooms (1962; 1978). Vygotsky suggested that for complex learning, such as communicative language learning, two overlapping affordances were essential: 1) social interaction and 2) some scope for the learner to direct her/his own learning. Vygotsky exemplified how children made unique personal meanings when allowed to interact with others in their peer-group in an inclusive way; in other words, he described such learning as *constructivism*. He suggested that it was this socially-situated sense-making or *construction*, often accompanied by enjoyment or at least engagement, that led to valuable personal development. Overall personal development was, he believed, the purpose for all learning and teaching. Chaiklin described Vygotsky's view that, when the learner engaged in interaction, this allowed 'formation of new functions or the enrichment of existing functions' (2003, 47). Whatever a child learnt individually had to be trialled socially in order to become richly embedded.

A learning stimulus was relevant to an individual when it connected with their own social context and only then could it make 'a worthwhile difference to the individual's

representation of the world' (Wilson & Sperber 2006, 608). Individual volition and interest, closely related to enjoyment, directed this developmental process. The Vygotskian model of learning thereby challenged traditional beliefs that the teacher transmitting information to passive-receptive students was adequate, *if* the goal was complex learning resulting in overall development of the child. In summary, Vygotsky's theories assume learning to be non-linear, recursive, complex and relational. Learning seen in this light is supported by contexts where students have a sense of ownership and control over their own learning process and can learn with and from each other in safe and trusting learning environments.

Models of teaching

Classical humanist teaching theory reinforces Vygotsky's social constructivist theories about learning. Cornelius-White (2007) indicated how humanist, or person-centred, teaching approaches embraced constructivist learning theories and also drew on the client-centred psychotherapy models represented by Carl Rogers. He suggested:

The classical approach emphasizes teacher empathy (understanding), unconditional positive regard (warmth), genuineness (self-awareness), nondirectivity (student-initiated and student-regulated activities) and the encouragement of critical thinking (as opposed to traditional memory emphasis)... Rogers's theory of education has as its goal the facilitation of the whole and fully functioning person, who is a citizen and leader in a democratic society (113).

Rogers demonstrated, from his therapeutic work, that learning (which he perceived as "personal growth") occurred best when teacher and student had a trusting, two-way relationship in which each held the other in "unconditional positive regard". The non-

judgmental teacher-student relationship therefore underpinned the success of teaching and learning. The same could be said to be true among peers learning together in a classroom. Rogers also saw the seeking and embracing of a willingness to be changed and to make change as the hallmarks of students and also teachers within the person-centred framework. As Rogers (1951) stated:

Within the limitations which are imposed by circumstance and authority, or are imposed by the instructor as necessary for his [her] own psychological comfort, an atmosphere of permissiveness, of acceptance, or reliance upon student responsibility, is created (397).

The traditional model of teaching, in contrast, assumed learning to be 'being taught' and does not therefore acknowledge that learning is dependent on positive social relationships and group co-construction; nor that it thrives on initiative-taking and creativity. According to the traditional model, teachers keep pupils strictly under control using the *converging function* and *certifying function* of the Initiation-Response-Feedback triad (Lin 2007). The converging function helps teachers to 'maintain tight control and minimise digression' (88); while the certifying function moulds students' input into acceptable answers to exam-type questions, 'to certify it as correct and [to] model answers' (88). Control, rather than social construction, typifies the traditional teaching approach.

Research design

This paper draws on two separate but connected research projects. From the combined projects, qualitative data was collected from 57 interviews with 81 primary pupils in Alexandria, Egypt. Project 1 took place in 2015-6, supported by British Council ELTRA funding (see Hargreaves, Mahgoub and ElHawary 2016). On the basis of findings from Project 1, teacher

development needs were identified and Project 2 was established to address these. Project 2 took place in 2016-7, led and funded by Education Development Trust. Two of the lead researchers in Project 1 (authors of this paper) continued into Project 2.

Both projects drew on interpretivist methodological assumptions that the reality of the classroom was experienced and understood by different people in diverse ways. We assumed that viewpoints were being constructed and revised through our own and our participants' ongoing interactions with each other (Bryman 2008; Maxwell 2012). We aimed to unravel and then interpret the experiences and understandings of classroom learning described by primary aged Egyptian pupils during interviews; and through classroom observations. Our aim was to make our findings relatable to other similar contexts.

Eight schools were chosen opportunistically, drawing on links already established between the research team and certain schools. Links were helpful since access to non-private schools can be sensitive in Egypt. We excluded private schools from our sample since we aimed to investigate experiences of average, rather than privileged, pupils in Egypt. One school participated in both projects although different pupils were involved.

In both projects, we asked each school to provide us with a quiet, private room in which to carry out interviews with individual pupils (N=38 individuals in Project 1) or small-groups of two to five pupils (N=19 groups made up of 43 children in total in Project 2). All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated (since most interviews were conducted in Arabic).

Interviews lasted from 9-51 minutes. One pupil declined to be interviewed.

We adhered strictly to the BSA ethical code (2002) and offered participants complete choice about whether to take part, as well as anonymity, especially reassuring them that their teachers would never know what they told us. We have therefore given children pseudonyms in the text

below, as well as an indication of year group [yN]. Pupils were all informed of the nature and purposes of the projects and gave individual consent to take part and be audio-recorded.

Teachers also gave informed consent and have pseudonyms. We were a team of two Egyptians and one English researcher, two women and one man. While the presence of one foreigner did cause some distraction in schools, it also lent the projects a certain status which encouraged participation. All members of the team spoke English and Arabic.

Project 1

CONTEXT

This Project explored Egyptian primary pupils' perceptions of learning and teaching of English in their existing [traditional] classrooms. In these classrooms, we observed up to 72 children sitting in tightly-formed rows of wooden desks facing a white board at the front of class. The English lessons were delivered in traditional lecture style, the teacher providing most of the input, accompanied by a prescribed text-book and vocabulary written on the white board during the class. Children sat, often with very little desk-space to write, completing exercises in their books and repeating choruses initiated by the teacher. Occasionally, one or two children would be singled out to read a short passage or answer a "quick-fire" question.

These lessons perhaps looked similar to nineteenth century classrooms in Europe where the goal was to help as many pupils as possible to learn the same content at the same time using minimal resources (Lefstein 2002, 1629). In other words, the factory model was applied. Large numbers of pupils were therefore assigned to one teacher's control. However, to manage these large groups of pupils, each teacher had to apply coercion to control pupils' behaviour and force them to into passivity. The authority bestowed by a teacher's subject expertise tended to merge

with their disciplinary authority to control pupils' behaviour. This was the model adopted in the project schools, as it is in many schools all over the globe.

SAMPLE

There were 393 year 5 pupils who completed sentence-starters relating to their English lessons. The sentence-starters (presented in colloquial Arabic) included:

1. The things I do in the English class where I benefit most are...
2. The things I do in the English class which do not benefit me are...
3. The teacher who helps me learn best is...

Then 38 individual interviews were carried out with pupils from three schools. We selected the 38 interviewees by reading sentence-completions from the 393 children and selecting those who appeared most engaged with critiquing classroom learning. These included those perceived as higher attaining as well as lower attaining (although we did not select systematically against this criterion). We also observed the nine classes from which we drew pupil participants, observing one English lesson and one other lesson in each class [N=18 observations]. Seven girls were interviewed in each of three schools; and six boys interviewed in two schools and five boys in the third. We asked the children about their educational aspirations, experiences of learning English and recommendations for classroom change. In our findings section (below), Project 1 pupils' words can be identified as year 5 pupils [y5]. Pupils from Project 2 came from years 1, 4 and 6 [y1, y4 and y6].

Project 2

CONTEXT

Project 2 was attached to a teacher development initiative which took place across six schools in Alexandria using findings from Project 1. The project began with a Middle Leader being trained in each school to establish a Teacher Learning Community [or Team] in their school. With the Project Consultants' support (two of the authors of this paper), these Teams met once per month and the Middle Leader helped a group of their volunteering teachers to try out innovative classroom activities based on teaching and learning needs identified by each teacher. As a research team, we observed most of these activities during the 21 observations we made during Project 2.

Most of these activities involved teachers establishing collaborative activities in their classrooms and it is those we focus on here. The actual activities were chosen or constructed by the teachers themselves as part of their professional development through Teacher Learning Teams. The guidance the Consultants gave for these activities was that teachers would only try out what they felt comfortable with, but they had to try it three times at least with the same class. Thus a diversity of arrangements were put in place in the primary-school classrooms, depending on individual issues. The input provided during the Teacher Learning Teams included an introduction to the "distributed expertise" approach of Ann Brown et al. (1993) and Gordon Wells (2000) in which responsibility for learning is deliberately distributed among learners as well as existing with the teacher. Knowledge was seen as socially constructed. Equally, each pupil's contribution was valued as part of the learning/teaching process even though each one might be different. All members of the group, whether a whole class group or a small one, had equal value although their

contributions were various. According to Brown et al. (1993) and Wells (2000), collaborative learners complemented and built on each other's views to construct shared knowledge. For example, if members of a group had each read a different text relating to a topic through sharing the meanings they have each made from a different text, as a group they build up a richer picture than they would have individually. In this case, learning only partially consists of acquiring information that is already fixed. The teacher's challenge is to encourage students to collaborate, rather than to compete or to work alongside each other. This does not happen easily and can be a hugely challenging task. Especially in classrooms where competition and hierarchical relationships are entrenched, it demands the teacher's and learners' skill and persistence (see Mercer *et al.*, 2004). However, it would be worth the initial effort if richer learning ensues.

Collaborative learners are likely to voice emergent or intuitive ideas and so have a chance to try them out in public (Crook, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978; 1986). When there is a disagreement in a group, this promotes reflection and a critical exploration of a topic within the group; and at the same time helps each individual firm up her/his own stance. Collaborative learning is therefore characterized (in Watkins' words) '... by the interplay of private and public reflection' (Watkins 2005, 5). Indeed, some argue that all '... human learning is necessarily and fundamentally social' (Watkins 2005, 14).

Grouping in our research classrooms included: groups of fours and fives in which each group had been provided with written English questions to answer collaboratively; groups of three in which pupils chose English writing tasks which had varying difficulty, within which to complete a film review; groups of six in which each group divided up into characters to act out a dramatic story; and pair-work in which pairs asked each other set questions and gave each other answers in English.

SAMPLE

From December 2016 to March 2017, we carried out group-interviews with 43 pupils who experienced the collaborative activities listed above. Year groups included:

yr 1 (N = 7)

yr 4 (N=12)

yr 6 (N=24)

These interviews focused on pupils' perceptions of whether, and if so, how collaborative activities influenced their learning of English in the traditional classroom.

Data analysis

As researchers, we collaboratively discussed and made interpretations of pupil comments, through several layers of analysis of the multiple perspectives described by pupils. This was an iterative process drawing on Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Crotty 2015). Interpretations involved continuous reflection between researchers and across different stages of analysis. Codes were discussed and refined collaboratively. Observation notes were used as contextual data. Three broad themes were generated inductively as headings under which to describe how pupils perceived learning tasks in these classrooms:

- a) How/whether support from peers without competition encouraged learning;
 - b) How/whether opportunities for self-direction and participation encouraged learning;
- and
- c) How/whether enjoyment related to learning.

FINDINGS and DISCUSSION

In this section, we outline how pupils described their perceptions about the traditional classroom, drawing primarily on Project 1. We then illustrate pupils' perceptions of engaging in interactive learning, during Project 2. In particular, we report how pupils described their learning as benefiting from peer support without competition; how their learning benefited when they participated more proactively and inclusively and how enjoyment of collaborative work encouraged engagement and learning.

Pupils described their perceptions about the traditional classroom

The teacher's control

In the traditional classrooms we observed, most pupils sat silently in rows, facing the white-board and the teacher. Sara [y5] expressed pupils' common belief that their task was to be submissive to the teacher's control by keeping quiet:

Students should be well-behaved in class and shouldn't upset their teacher... If we all sit quietly in class, we will understand.

She illustrated the merging of the concepts of discipline as behaviour control; and discipline for learning. The teacher's behaviour control, she believed, led to learning. She thereby suggested that interaction with peers was not only unnecessary but was actually obstructive to learning: opportunities for participation could *prevent* 'understanding' by encouraging disarray. In her context, everyone was measured against the 'normalised' standard of forthcoming examinations and therefore idiosyncratic contributions from individuals seemed worthless. Our findings illustrated that even interaction with the teacher was not necessary: the teacher controlled the lessons according to prescribed materials, often regardless of how well pupils were responding to them. Struggling to keep up was even seen

as a form of 'deviance' (Young 1971, 5) which challenged the teacher's control. Pupils told us that both peers and teachers would laugh at the 'weak' students when they tried to speak English, especially if they made a mistake. Hala [y5] reflected: "I think hard before speaking in English. I am afraid that they may laugh at me". Those who would not or could not conform were socially excluded as if learning were primarily a matter of obedience rather than creative development. A few children suggested that teachers were right to control them physically too, by hitting children if they made mistakes. For example, Maha [y5] commented, "When the teacher punishes the students by hitting it is because they have done something wrong".

Teacher as the sole authority

In Project 1, children tended to consider the teacher as the sole authority. We asked year 5 pupils who had only ever experienced the traditional classroom, about the possibility of peers supporting other pupils' learning processes. Mohamed [y5] explained:

We prefer teachers' corrections more as we are used to it and the teacher knows better... It is the teacher's job.

Consequently, in order to improve their learning, pupils did not value interaction with other pupils in class. In any case, pupil Mohamed illustrated his conception of learning as 'being corrected' rather than as 'developing'; of doing the 'right' thing rather than achieving something original. However, 37 pupils [26 girls; 11 boys] also explained that the teacher was so severe it made it difficult to ask questions. "Unconditional positive regard" did not seem to feature in the highly judgementalised teacher-student relationship (Rogers, 1951). Thereby, in the competition between control and learning, control was supreme. On the other hand, this control could have negative effects: some pupils also told us that when the

teacher shouted at them or hit them and their peers, it stopped them from learning because they felt 'distracted', 'confused', 'embarrassed', 'upset', 'angry', 'insulted' or 'afraid'. But the teacher's dominance could also have benefits, for example, when the teacher's charisma enthused pupils. Hasna'a [y5] explained:

If he [the teacher] loves the students and they love him, then they will follow what he says.

We therefore interpreted from these narratives and our observations that the pupils depended heavily on the control of the particular teacher. Children sat quietly facing the teacher, without communicating with each other (despite being tightly packed in rows) and sometimes feeling too constrained to interact with the teacher. The teacher controlled the content and pace of activities, which tended to focus on examination preparation. Pupils were constantly surveyed by the teacher and her/his superiors in a culture of threat and sometimes fear.

Pupils' perceptions of engaging in interactive learning

Interacting in pairs and small groups

During Project 2, the traditional class layout and procedures were partially modified, as we observed several teachers trying out pair and group-work (for the first time in their lives). By doing so, they were dismantling the classroom controls which prevented communication among pupils; as well as abandoning the completeness of their control over class content and pace. When preparing to do collaborative lessons, some teachers told us informally that they were anxious about not being able to monitor all the children during interactive activities. Others initially found it difficult to imagine "simultaneous" pair or group-work at all. Every teacher had used model pairs before: that is, two pupils who modelled a dialogue

in front of class. But in that method, usually only the most fluent pupils had the chance to speak in front of others, and usually a maximum of two or four actually spoke at all in any one lesson. Pupils competed for this privilege of expression. Through simultaneous pair-work or group-work, on the other hand, whereby all pupils interacted with peers *in the same moment of time*, all pupils could gain some practice in speaking English at once. As we supported teachers over six months in Teacher Learning Teams (Hargreaves and ElHawary 2018), they gradually came to appreciate that even if they could not *correct* every child during collaborative learning, at least each child was gaining English speaking *practice*.

Example of pair-work

A simple example of pair-work was seen in Teacher Yousry's year 4 class as follows. Teacher Yousry wrote on the board, 'What is your favourite sport?' He elicited from pupils a range of possible responses and listed those on the board. He asked each child to label themselves A or B and asked the As to question the Bs, and the Bs to respond. That is, A asked B, "What is your favourite sport?" B told A, "My favourite sport is..." Then they changed roles. Next, they changed partners. The prompts and responses could be more or less complicated and could vary in open-endedness depending on the children in class.

When teachers first introduced pair or group-work, we sensed that some were surprised by how smoothly it worked. Our interpretation was, however, that pupils themselves did not find it strange. One [y4] child commented, "We are young. When we speak in pairs, we are very happy". They seemed to adapt to it quite easily, albeit with some extra excitement.

Pupils described the following features of collaborative activities as particularly helpful to their English learning: support from peers without competition; opportunities for proactive participation and inclusiveness; and enjoyment.

Pupils' described their learning as benefiting from constructive peer support

Some pupils found it helpful to learn English with and from peers. For example, Hassan [y4] surprised us by proposing that sometimes pupils learned better from other pupils than from the teacher:

Last year, I used to work alone... teachers used words that were new to me. I didn't know their meanings... My dad used to make me answer a reading exercise every night. But now, since I started working in groups, my friends help me with the words I don't know. When I go home, I study the words I learned from them.

Lulu in year 6 also noted the relational benefits of non-competitive peer-teaching in contrast to teacher-controlled teaching:

When [correction is] from my friends, it's easier. They say [gentle voice], 'This should be like this'. But when the teacher corrects me, she says [cross voice], 'Why did you do it like this? This is wrong! Don't do it again!'

Year 6 pupil, Radwa, focused on the fact that each person's unique ideas could contribute to the improved quality of the collaborative creation, because each person had something special to offer and they were not competing:

I liked the fact that we worked together. At first, we all had the same ideas. Then one girl had a different idea! So she gave us much more to add to the story.

Another example was Esme's [y6]. She saw the big picture for collaboration, perhaps in a globally-oriented future, where grappling openly with diversity played an important role:

It is good because team-work teaches us - when we grow up, not just in school - to work together, in our jobs. Our own ideas alone won't help us. Other people have ideas.

Pupils told us that their learning benefited when they participated more proactively and more inclusively

Lulu [y6] described how creative pupils could be during collaborative activities, freed from the constraints of traditional classes. She told us:

Everyone has a different idea, so everyone says their idea, and we put the ideas together, and this gives us something new.

To our surprise, in stark contrast to the view that 'weak' pupils should be reprimanded, some children suggested that group-work could benefit both those who were seen as 'weak' as well as those who were considered competent:

If one of the group isn't good at English because she has always studied everything in Arabic, it's better that we help her and she learns... I help her and she helps me and we make a good team. When I help her and she does the same, we all benefit. Even if I'm really good, I still benefit [Laila, y6].

During group-work, we observed how pupils were keen to include everyone in their group, for example, by putting an arm around any peer whose attention was straying. Hassan in year 4 told us that through group-work, "We all share opinions and no one is left behind". Teacher Hanan additionally offered her year 6 pupils *a choice of tasks to do*, all centred around writing a film review. Offering choice in this way was completely new for her class. The concept of differentiation was itself a rare focus for teachers in this system. Teacher Hanan was experimenting with providing differentiation without telling the pupils what level

of task they should each choose. Pupil Injy explained why she had chosen the most challenging of Hanan's four options:

Because I can add my own ideas, not just using the ideas that are printed. That's why I like it.

This discovery of drawing on each person's unique ideas was another misfit in the traditional classroom where conformity under the teacher's control had been championed.

Pupils told us that enjoyment of collaborative work encouraged engagement and learning

Some pupils told us that they enjoyed collaborative activities. Of course, at this time, such activities were also a novelty and it is possible that such effects would wear off. However, Samia in year 6 commented:

If all teachers made us *like* the lessons, the curriculum wouldn't be so hard... It's collaboration. This makes us like any subject more... We like the subject more; and the teacher more; and all the activities more!

Mervat [y6] seemed to perceive 'studying' as a limited and less enjoyable part of her English language experience: by which perhaps she meant 'being taught' grammar and vocabulary.

When learning English through collaborative speaking activities, however, she wanted to keep practising:

Miss Saida makes us do a lot of [collaborative] things and she makes us think that English is a fun language and we love it. We have to do work in pairs because it improves our *use* of language. English is not only for studying: we can use it later when we travel abroad or when we chat with friends.

Teacher Amr's year 6 students also saw that their enjoyment during group drama activities was likely to have long-term benefits for their English learning. Farida suggested:

It will also help us in secondary school when we remember these things and the fun and the acting... The acting helps us to remember things.

Her peer, Ahlam, agreed, saying:

Before when I learned English, I thought it was annoying. I was always waiting for the end of the lesson. Since we started acting, I enjoy it, and I want to act well and speak English better.

Problematic aspects of group and pair-work

However, there were some less enjoyable moments during collaborative activities, which may have reflected that these were early days of development. Some of the issues, however, such as how groups were constituted, may continue to be challenging even for the most experienced collaborators. Dalia [y6], for example, told us about problems related to how groups or pairs were formed which mitigated against inclusiveness:

When we work in groups with the story, the teacher tells us, 'Get into groups and divide the characters between you!' But this can be annoying if you want to be in a group, and they don't want you... The teacher should check that they are all happy to work together.

Another year 6 pupil, Rania, encountered pupil opposition to the concept that everyone's contribution was valuable. For Rania, there appeared to be a notion that if everyone could be valued, something greater than the sum of the parts might be created:

Sometimes each group chooses the same girl every time to write or read. That's it.

But we should co-operate and participate more, so everyone works, and we produce something better.

Hassan [y4] described how some boys in his small group claimed that they were leaders and he was just a "follower". He added: "They say that I can't give answers unless they are absent." His peer, Hesham, continued:

Farhan assigns deputies [during group-work] and decides who his prisoners are...

Those pupils keep bossing us around and I don't like that.

The boys also talked about groups competing against other groups to 'win' by finishing a task first. Even more destructively, pupils in other groups laughed at peers in his group who were doing less well. These pupils therefore pointed out that the teacher needed an efficient – but new - system to control the class, which might involve the teacher using a pupil as a 'monitor'; or deciding for each group who would be the one who spoke for the group [Hesham, y4]. This highlighted the fact that, although control was still vital, traditional behaviour-management measures would no longer be sustained during collaboration and this necessitated reflection on how to proceed differently. According to Hesham, it might also mean that sometimes, some aspects of learning should *not* be done in groups.

Concluding comments

A deeply-entrenched model of school learning and teaching will not shift easily, especially in unsettled times, such as currently found in the Middle East. However, what is illustrated by our interpretations of 81 primary pupils' perceptions, is that there is some wriggle-room for manoeuvre, as perceived by pupils, albeit still under the teacher's control. Many pupils

engaged pro-actively with a range of collaborative activities that they believed supported their English learning. This study did not investigate the teachers' perceptions but we observed that they were also surprised by the productive learning responses the children made when they loosened their control.

Most pupils in our study still continued to revere conformity and to esteem the control of those higher up the social hierarchy. And yet there appeared to be some pupils who genuinely came to have 'a different idea' in the classroom. They had a different idea about the act itself of *having a different idea* and of building on this through constructions with peers. The outlook of some pupils in these projects seemed to challenge the idea embedded in the traditional model, that the classroom – and therefore learning - is out of control if pupils are interactive and self-directed. Some pupils suggested that by allowing increased opportunities for interaction and self-direction, they in fact became *more* controllable for the teacher (Kohn 1996) while at the same time learning in a more sociable way that attended to person-centred or humanistic aspects of learning. For example, pupils started to help each other rather than compete against each other because the interactive classroom provided control based on intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation (Niemi and Ryan 2009). Some of the classrooms we observed were very crowded, making teacher control a particularly pertinent issue. Comparing a traditional class of 70 pupils in Project 1 with a collaborative class of 70 pupils in Project 2, we noted how difficult it was for Project 1 teachers to control so many pupils when the children were *not* collaborating or self-directing. Indeed, pair and group-work seemed to be an appropriate method for controlling even the largest classes – but this time in specifically learning-oriented ways.

Rogers' proposed atmosphere of increased permissiveness, acceptance, or reliance upon student responsibility appeared to be successful for some of these children (1951, 397). This socially-situated sense-making or *knowledge construction* was aided by a teaching model of increased student-initiated and student-regulated activities and the encouragement of more critical and creative thinking. Here, the teacher as sole authority could be supplemented when children found each other's support better tailored to their needs than the teacher's; and their peers' comments less frightening than a controlling teacher's words. The children referred in some instances to improved relationships among themselves as they took increased responsibility for one another in collaboration, overriding other differences. Clearly we were drawing on some very partial narratives by a small handful of pupils. A much larger sample and more systematic research into the practice of collaboration in the traditional classroom is now necessary. However, our findings suggest that further research (and development) would be well worth investing in.

Our theoretical conclusions are that, in the traditional model, social cohesion and subject acquisition in the classroom are controlled by the teacher who attempts to make every child conform to the classroom norms, norms of both behaviour and curriculum. In the more interactive person-centred model, on the other hand, social cohesion and subject usage in the classroom support every child to construct their own unique contribution within a social group. This in turn builds up more social cohesion and further subject acquisition.

In terms of implications for practice, teachers seemed to need support in organising groupings and watching out for those who obstructed group-work. Experimenting with group size will be important and organising the roles of individuals within groups is likely to be challenging. Setting appropriate tasks to capitalise on interaction will also demand

attention. Further support for children's productive listening and questioning in groups may be helpful too. Fortunately, the teachers from this study were engaged in Teacher Learning Teams, in which they could regularly reflect on and replan their innovative teaching activities in dialogue with other teachers. Teacher Learning Teams seemed to be a powerful model for exploring their innovations because the Teams were also founded on the principles of collaboration and self-direction (Hargreaves and Elhawary 2018).

However, for system-wide change to occur towards more constructivist classrooms, further socio-cultural shifts will be needed. These will need to move social emphases away from national unity cemented through a 'deeply entrenched culture of obedience and conformity' (Ab Kadir 2017, 237), and towards national cohesion based on the valuing of the individual's original and diverse contributions towards changing and improving the whole. As Esme [y6] expressed it: "Our own ideas alone won't help us. Other people have ideas".

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