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# WHAT DO WE MEAN BY *SOCIAL* IN RELATION TO LEARNING AND THE ROLE OF TEACHERS?

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## Familiar use of the word *social*: Introduction

The word *social* is often used as a modifying adjective to describe behaviour of a group, collective, community, society or organisation. There are *social* actions and we have *social* problems. We also understand that human beings are *social* animals. We require interaction with others, so we seek relationship/association/affiliation/cooperation with others and we gather in communities. According to Wikipedia, the etymology of the word *social* comes from “the Latin word *socii* (‘allies’) referring to allied states of the Roman Republic”. We might take from this that to be *social* is to be in a positive relationship with others as individuals or groups. During the COVID-19 health crisis our connections are virtual through *social* media. Other terms we are familiar with are *social* security, *social* studies, sociology, *social* skills, *social* work. *Social* may also be a description for temporary behaviour—being *social*—during a specific period of time.

Our vocabulary conveys our intended (and unintended) messages depending on the other person’s understanding of the terms we use. The notion of probability, for example, has different connotations—and denotations—depending on if we are a mathematician (“what is the statistical probability of this result applying to a wider population?”), a fisherman (“what is the probability that the fish are biting here?”) or a family member (“what is the probability that she will pop in on her way home?”). Like many terms in everyday use, ‘social’ is used differently in theoretical and practical contexts, in academic and professional literature (learning theory and pedagogy) and in dialogue between members of different groups. Here, I will examine the word *social* in reference to curriculum, pedagogy, learning and the role of teachers.

How educators use the word ‘social’ in conversations about learning, learners, teaching and teacher practice may have caused our use of this term in education to be reinforced, blurred, and/or confused. In this piece, I give some attention to how different educators might be using *social* differently. The words educators use also communicate their teaching philosophies, beliefs and priorities. As educators we need to understand our own points of view philosophically and theoretically, and to regularly (re)align our pedagogical practices with our big-picture educational aims.

## *Social* in curriculum and pedagogy

Policy and curricula in many countries now give attention to personal dispositions and *social* competencies as well as subject knowledge and skills. Children bring *social* skills to school: they are learned informally through experience and practice in families and other agencies such as churches, sports clubs, and neighbourhoods. The importance of learning social skills for cooperation in classrooms, engagement and productivity as citizens in society and/or for sustained economic growth are the reasons proposed for this attention. People generally agree that in a diverse, information-rich, data-driven 21<sup>st</sup> century social and economic environment, knowledge is not enough.

Social skills are “critical pre-requisites to academic and interpersonal success” (Elliott & Gresham, 1987, p. 96). Social skills, then, have personal, social and achievement outcomes. Social outcomes for children include peer acceptance, others’ judgment of one’s social skills, competence, self-esteem, and healthy mental and emotional adjustment (Elliott & Gresham, 1987). According to Dowd and Tierney (2005), “social skills enable a person to appropriately communicate with, respond to, make a request from, and get along with other people” (p. 6). Critical thinking, problem solving, self-managed learning,

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interpersonal, social and communication skills are included in lists of desirable social skills by policy makers, educators and employers.

The four pillars for education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, by Delors et al. (1996), reflect attention on social skills. These four pillars are learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. In *learning to know*, the authors emphasise learners' mastery of learning tools, learning how to learn and how to think. *Learning to do* is about personal competence including skills like reflection, managing self, communication and problem-solving. *Learning to live together* is about awareness of 'similarities and interdependence' of people, and respect and appreciation of diversity in order to be able to learn and work together. Under *Learning to be*, one aim of education is individual fulfilment as intelligent, creative, imaginative, social, spiritual members of families and communities as citizens, producers, inventors, creators and dreamers. Delors et al. (1996) signalled a shift from *what* curricular subject knowledge is important to an emphasis on learning *how* to learn and personal individual development for education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Social skills, in this view, become core aspects of curriculum. An example of this are the Key Competencies (MoE, 2007, pp. 12–13).

Learning builds on what individuals already know (and continue to construct). Teachers' understanding of prior knowledges and working theories that children bring to classroom learning becomes a critical step in the learning process and the planned class curriculum. Such knowledges, social and cultural values, aptitudes and ways of interacting influence not only their own individual and cultural identity but also relationships in the classroom. What we can call *social pedagogy*, then, includes collaborative learning and classrooms as learning communities (see also Kutnick & Blatchford's 2014 concept of social pedagogy cited in Claire Colman's piece in this issue).

Social pedagogy has elements of social constructivism; democracy, in recognition of and respect for socio-cultural differences and developing social skills (Dewey, 1916); promotion of cross-cultural understanding; and motivation through the power of being in a relationship and of making a contribution. "Contribution" is one of Tomlinson's (2002) five keys to learning. She proposes that "students have at least five needs that teachers can address to make learning irresistible: affirmation, contribution, purpose, power and challenge" (p. 8). Students are looking for a way to contribute in the classroom and school. For teacher pedagogy and class curriculum, each of Tomlinson's aspects involves acknowledgment, interaction, recognition and action that will also build collective capacity and contribute to a wider social good along with learning progress for learners.

### **Social for learners and teachers**

Learners in compulsory sector classrooms are—through teaching and learning activities—coming to know and understand that which is already known and understood in a number of subject discipline areas identified and shaped by *socially*-constructed and approved curriculum documents. New Zealand National Curriculum functions "to set the direction for student learning and to provide guidance for schools as they design and review their curriculum" (MoE, 2007, p. 6). School's curriculums describe the content knowledge, skills and understandings of subjects based on achievement objectives by level in this national curriculum and its partner document *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* (MoE, 2008) interpreted to reflect each school and the school's community.

Classroom curriculums and practices of New Zealand teachers have been influenced by constructivist learning theory through New Zealand's national curriculum (MoE, 2007). *Social* in constructivist theory refers to a belief in the kind of learning opportunities individuals need to grow cognitively by including new ideas and alternative understandings into their current thinking or prior knowledge. Children's prior knowledge is learned through informal questioning, social interactions and discovery experiences. Just as new disciplinary knowledge is generated and validated through debate and negotiation, working together and talking together (Gilbert, 2018) in constructivist classrooms children construct new knowledge and make meaning as individuals (cognitively and personally) from interaction, dialogue and collaboration. The learner is seen as active in making cognitive connections between their 'old' knowledge and their 'new' knowledge, from unstructured, informal, social and cultural knowledge to structured academic knowledge promoted by education systems, schools and teachers—knowledge that is organised and taught as curriculum subjects (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2019; McPhail, 2017). Teacher practices that come under a constructivist approach include gathering

children's current ideas, and providing and facilitating opportunities for children's co-construction of knowledge, often through learning activities set up for groups.

In constructivist views, teachers can be asked to stay out of the way of children's learning, to stand aside while children collaborate and inquire and undertake projects, for example, as 'digital natives'. Biesta (2012) considers the messages that teachers may receive from constructivist policy:

... teachers should not aim for total control of their students but should always encounter them as human subjects in their own right. And part of its appeal ... has to do with the fact that people can only learn for themselves and others cannot do this for them. Taken together these lines seem to suggest that we should neither want the teacher to teach, nor that it is really possible for the teacher to do so. (Biesta, 2012, p. 40)

One of the challenges for teachers who use constructivist theory to plan learning activities is not necessarily being asked to step back but knowing *how far to step* and *what is too far*. Teacher decision-making in inter-action includes questions of when and how to intervene. Teachers might be taking reading groups while play-based activities go on or filling in student reports while students are in their inquiry groups. To what extent are these examples of facilitation of learning? Teaching is not about, as Biesta said, "the repetition of what is already there but about bringing something new—and perhaps it is important to say: something *radically* new—to the situation (Biesta, 2012, p. 41). Therefore, under a constructivist approach, classroom teachers are asked to provide opportunities for student-student interaction, inquiry and discovery experiences, while at the same time providing access to the ('new to students') structured academic knowledge that is organised into subjects and levels of an official curriculum.

In socio-cultural learning theory, *social* refers to the importance of learners' social and cultural knowledges to their ongoing learning and human development (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2019). Rather than a focus on the individual cognitive or academic development of learners as happens under constructivist theory, a socio-cultural view emphasises learners' social and cultural relationships, knowledges and practices as members of groups. These groups or identities may include family, ethnicity, religion, class/economic status, gender, language, nationality and the group of learners in a particular classroom and school. Who the child is and the experiences she brings to school influences how she experiences the culture of the school and the kinds of learning opportunities presented to her at school.

Using a socio-cultural view, teacher practice "recognises, accepts and values the cultural knowledge[s] that students *bring* [emphasis added] to their learning" (Bunting, 2019, p. 35). Teachers need an awareness of individual and group identity, worldviews, and different knowledges and knowledge systems—including their own (Berryman & Eley, 2019) and those within the subject/disciplines they teach. Teachers need to notice and recognise diversity in order to foster all learners' individual and cultural identity, provide learning opportunities for collaborative meaning-making, and negotiate and mediate cultural boundary crossing. The teacher in many ways sets up the climate of interactions and sense of community in the classroom.

The *social* in social constructivism refers to how children learn. In socio-cultural theory the word *social* refers to who children are and what they bring to their learning. Both of these learning theories can lead to student-centred pedagogical approaches. Planning for opportunities for student-student dialogue and cooperation has a basis in the belief/theory that talking and working together helps us learn. This belief is the basis of learning in some cultures (i.e. is also a cultural belief) but not in all cultures (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2019). Putting students in groups, however, does not ensure cooperation, collaboration or conviviality nor will cultural diversity in the class necessarily develop cross-cultural understanding. Teachers help children. They help them communicate and develop an understanding of one another, which helps them learn and learn collaboratively.

Criticisms of constructivism based on evidence of low-learning outcomes from activities designed so that students learn for themselves (see for example, Fisher & Frey 2013; Kirschner et al., 2006) along with potential confusions (Gilbert, 2018; McPhail, 2017) might suggest teachers have stepped back too far. The challenge with a socio-cultural approach for teachers also involves how we practise the teacher's role. To know one's self, come to know each student and family, develop cross cultural

understandings and be able to role model and teach social skills involved in cross cultural collaboration, may constitute major challenges for experienced teachers as well as for beginning teachers (Berryman & Eley, 2019).

Some student teachers in our graduate teacher education programme recently said that they did not want to be boxed in by an association with, or use of, learning theory labels. They were expressing the idea that teachers need to be responsive, agile, flexible and resourceful. While overlooking how learning theory can help us understand and critique ‘teaching’, these ideas express an understanding of the role of the teacher. Are our pre-service teachers receiving the message that they need to be so flexible and responsive as to be focused *only* on what works for learners? Our teacher education programmes at University of Waikato advocate teachers be culturally responsive and consider this essential (Berryman & Eley, 2019; Bishop & Glynn, 2003). Can the importance of what works for the teacher, on the basis of their views of education, learning, learners, teaching and the role of teachers—in other words, their theoretical ideas—also be recognised?

Advocating for the use of a variety of pedagogical strategies is not the same as advocating that a teacher can hold a variety of theoretical positions at one time. It is probably wise that teachers are able to employ a variety of strategies that may come from different learning theories in teaching and learning; however, it is hard for a teacher to stand under multiple theoretical umbrellas simultaneously. Whether we use a metaphor—of a tree or umbrella shading our view, a pair of coloured glasses (rose-tinted?), or a torch drawing attention to some things while creating blind spots at the same time—or not, our beliefs and understandings from our own social and cultural knowledges, informal and formal socialisation, learning and education are powerful influences on our decision-making as teachers.

Our teacher beliefs will also be reflected in our teaching practices and, therefore, will be visible to others. Despite what we say in our philosophy statements about our commitment to culturally-responsive practices for Māori students, we may still view independent learning and individual achievement as of higher status and value than interdependent learning and the outcomes of group work. We may still value cognitive and academic abilities above social and relational competencies. The degree of alignment between our theoretical position/philosophy and our pedagogical practices may create dissonance for others as well as for ourselves.

Students, teacher colleagues and parents will notice (recognise) and respond to a teacher’s approach with or without the vocabulary of educational theory to describe or explain it, and whether or not the teacher can and/or has opportunities to articulate her or his beliefs. As teacher Christine Deeley commented:

We can all identify a teacher who was special, we learned from, who made us feel good, who removed the fear of getting something wrong, who was themselves so enthusiastic about learning we couldn’t help but be engaged, challenged, responsive and love learning. This had nothing what so ever to do with whether we were grouped, had an open-ended question to answer, had access to a computer, or any other tools/social arrangements. (Personal communication, 10 May, 2020)

Teachers may not want to be boxed in by learning theory labels but their beliefs about the aims of education, the role of teachers and of schooling will influence how individual teachers enact their role and their pedagogical decision-making day to day. Teachers also role-model behaviours they value including key competencies, collaboration, listening, and cross-cultural understanding.

As a full member of the class community, it matters who the teacher is as an individual, his or her group identity as a member of different socio-cultural group(s) and what they bring into the classroom in terms of beliefs, values and knowledges (Hochstrasser Fickel & Guerin, 2019). Is the teacher becoming overlooked as a member of the class community? Does a focus on student-learners lead to blind spots regarding the importance of recognising that the teacher also brings his/her own cultural identity and knowledges to the classroom?

### **The teacher as a member of the class community**

Previously, in an article on the way teachers as well as students experience assessment—both being ‘in’ assessment—I argued that teachers are *with* students and that “improving student learning through

assessment practice is an embodied process that arises out of the interactive relational space between teacher and learner” (Earl & Giles, 2011, p. 19). That article discusses an illustration of how teachers are alongside children/learners in classrooms and *in* teaching and learning experiences with them. Teachers and students come together socially and relationally as a group of human beings, all influencing and being influenced by the situation and interactions in and through pedagogical practices and learning activities.

Teachers are also learners and are learning during teaching and learning. Teachers learn about the children in their class. They learn what individuals already know, how students learn, what kinds of feedback individuals respond to, who these children work best with, what subjects they like, who their friends are, who their role models are, some of their favourite interests and objects, how the weather influences them and all sorts of other things. Teachers continue to learn about policy, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and subject specific knowledge. Teachers also learn and continue to learn about themselves as teachers. They continue to learn who they are, and who and how they want to be (Delors et al., 1996). Learning theories, such as constructivism and social cultural theory, can help teachers think about themselves as learners as well as understand their beliefs and pedagogical practices as teachers. When both students and teachers are learning within this social and cultural group—that is a class—then an appropriate term to describe what is happening is *learning-centred*, instead of student-centred or teacher-centred. Schools and classrooms are *social* spaces/communities and teaching and learning are *social* activities in these spaces where all community members are, or ideally are, learners.

### Final comments

I have highlighted the difference between the ‘social’ that enhances learning in constructivist thinking and the ‘social’ factors that learning is influenced by and entangled within socio-cultural theory. A belief that learning is enhanced through the use of group activities is different, in learning theory and in an individual’s teaching philosophy, to the belief that it is essential to know and take into account the different social groups our students belong to when designing teaching and learning activities. Ideas of learning being student-centred have shifted our attention away from the teacher as a person with their own social and cultural beliefs, knowledges and practices. If it matters what teachers believe and if teachers are members of the class community as well as other communities, then teacher self-knowledge of their own identity and culture along with the ability to articulate their understanding of the aims of education, role of schools and the role of teachers at a theoretical level also matter.

Different learning theories can help us examine different aspects of human learning, our own beliefs and pedagogical practices and the long-term educational aims we value. Biesta has said, “the question of the ‘nature’ of teaching connects back to the question of educational purpose” (2019, p. 269). The idea of social pedagogy or learning-centred pedagogy, as I promote, would be helpful here because it may support the recognition of the teacher’s/teachers’ membership in the class community and, therefore, the recognition of teachers’ needs for a sense of purpose, belonging and being valued.

As educators we need to take time to reflect on our own beliefs about the purposes of education, the role of teachers and schools, and the nature of knowledge and learning. To re-examine the alignment between our beliefs and pedagogical practices supports our authentic engagement with teaching and learning, with learners, and with all other class members and the school community. Having this self-knowledge allows teachers to recognise personal assumptions and blind spots so that we can subsequently modify our pedagogy. In the *social* environments that are classrooms, schools and school communities, this authenticity also helps sustain our wellbeing so we can continue to teach and to learn.

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