

## **Bullies and victims in a primary classroom: Scaffolding a collaborative community of practice**

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This paper is based on a year long research project that examined changes in participation of 31 students in a Year 4/5 classroom, where bullying was occurring. The teacher (first author and researcher) facilitated authentic learning opportunities to make the social practices explicit during weekly class meetings. A socio cultural perspective and an action research process framed this qualitative study. Data sources included school behaviour records, sociograms, semi-structured interviews, teacher observations and students' reflection logs. Rogoff's planes provided the analytical framework to examine how to scaffold a collaborative community of practice. The case studies of two students, Denis and Nathan, provide exemplars of how the teacher scaffolded students' social understandings within small social groups through collaborative leadership opportunities and values education. Results spanning the school year indicated that Nathan, like many of his peers, developed confidence to make new friends and become more assertive. Although Denis took longer to adopt pro-social goals, by the end of the school year, he refrained from bullying Nathan. The significance of this research supports recent findings that a focus on the social dynamics of the classroom can bring about positive change in student behaviour.

### **Introduction**

Teachers are well placed to promote students' social understandings that encourage mutual respect for peers and prevent bullying as positive relations are developed in the classroom and at school (Davidson, Lickona & Khmelkov, 2007; Noddings, 2005; Van Oers & Hännikäinen, 2001). It is widely accepted that ongoing bullying has harmful effects for all parties; if their behaviour goes unchecked, children who act as bullies are likely to behave in anti-social ways when they leave school (Rigby, 2003). Traditionally there has been a focus on the perpetrators and victims but more recent research has extended this focus to include peer relationships that contribute to this complex situation (Cross, 2010; DEEWR, 2009). Focussing on the social dynamics in a classroom involving Year 5 students who were bullies or victims, this paper tracks the cognitive shifts displayed as these students began to experience the benefits of positive peer relationships.

Slee (2003) argued that a key feature of bullying involves an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim, which can be manifested on a physical, verbal or psychological level. Similarly, Spears, Slee, Owens, Johnson & Campbell (2008), defined bullying as being characterised by an imbalance of power and consisting of a sub-set of aggressive behaviour in which there is deliberate intent to repeatedly harm. Whilst the target of the aggression experiences the behaviour as unwanted, the perpetrator may perceive the experience to be enjoyable. Research findings also confirm that when students are given opportunities to discuss values explicitly, student

well-being is enhanced, bullying is reduced and conditions for learning are improved (Lovat, Toomey, Clement, Crotty & Nielsen, 2009). Related research about the brain and emotions asserts that when students experience psychological safety, they are in a better learning state (Bernard, 1996; Goleman, 2006). Therefore, creating a caring, collaborative and student-centred classroom provides scaffolding to develop psychological safety and social and emotional understandings at school (Hart, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Walberg, Zins & Weissberg, 2004).

As evidenced in formal school assessment and reporting, the two Year 5 case study students (Nathan and Denis), did not demonstrate a positive attitude towards formal education, which affected their academic progress. Since Year 1, when the boys commenced primary school, Denis had bullied Nathan on a regular basis. School behaviour records also revealed that these types of bullying and victimisation incidents were widespread in the classroom and the playground affecting students' well-being and disposition to learn. To counter these issues, the research project aimed to scaffold student and teacher engagement in classroom social practices to develop collaborative leadership opportunities. To this effect, students would become motivated to behave in a pro-social way (MacCallum & Morcom, 2008). This long-term process facilitated the establishment of a collaborative community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

## **Theoretical perspectives**

### **Sociocultural theory, zones of proximal development and scaffolding**

Sociocultural theory provides an account of learning and development as a culturally and socially mediated process, which is well suited to research examining the cultural and social milieu of the classroom. Vygotsky (1978) believed an adult or peer (someone other than the learner) could mediate or translate knowledge about society and culture (see Ashman & Gillies, 2003, p. 199). A sociocultural perspective of learning is often used to theorise interaction in collaborative classrooms (Daniels, 2001) because assumptions are made about the importance of developing communication and interpersonal skills (Antil, Jenkins, Wayne & Vadasay, 1998; Friend & Cook, 1992; Renshaw, 1992). In the present study, the teacher/researcher mediated classroom practice using knowledge about students' social dynamics to scaffold social and cultural understandings that developed pro-social behaviour.

Vygotsky (1978) used the concept of *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) to theorise the kind of pedagogy likely to promote significant learning. He recognised the relevance of interpersonal interactions between the learner and more capable others and defined this ZPD as the distance between a child's "actual development as determined by independent problem solving" and the "potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Since the 1980s, researchers such as Bruner (1986) have interpreted Vygotsky's work and adopted the metaphor of scaffolding to conceptualise how adults can support children's learning through graduated, strategic steps that create ZPDs.

More recently, educational researchers have agreed that teachers need to play a central role to scaffold students' participation in the classroom to improve learning outcomes (Lutz, Guthrie & Davies, 2006; Ranker, 2009; Webb, Farivar & Mastergeorge, 2002). Turner & Patrick (2004) concluded that students' motivation to participate in class activities is related to teachers' pedagogical practices and a classroom environment which supports participation by developing collaborative work habits. Cooperative and collaborative pedagogies promote students working together in small groups to learn from each other (Hart, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 2003). Effective group work can be viewed as a reciprocal process where support from more able peers and the teacher may assist less able students to seek and receive assistance (Webb *et al.*, 2002).

Cumming-Potvin, Renshaw & van Kraayenoord (2003) asserted that students play a more central role in this dynamic, interactive process where the concept of ZPD is extended during guided participation. Therefore it can be argued that ZPDs are not a fixed attribute of the learner but vary as the students interact with each other. In the context of the classroom interaction discussed in this paper, multiple ZPDs were operating between the students and provided a feedback mechanism to the teacher about the quality of peer relationships.

### **Community of practice and Rogoff's planes**

A community of practice can be viewed as "a set of relations among persons, activity, and the world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). This concept implies that because individuals are members of multiple communities, their interactions and learning within these communities provide a variety of sources for meaning making. Thus, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of a community of practice offers a guiding principle to better understand learning as participation in the social world, including the classroom context, and how teachers scaffold students from legitimate peripheral towards mature participation. Included in Wenger's (1998, p. 136) indicators for a community of practice are: sustained harmonious or conflictual mutual relationships, shared ways of engaging in doing things together and a shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world. In this paper, legitimate peripheral participation is conceptualised as students observing and learning from others on the periphery of activities because it is their choice and not as a result of being excluded by peers due to bullying. Mature participation is conceptualised as students demonstrating pro-social behaviour with peers; this learning can also include a leadership role in a small social group.

The theoretical framework of this project drew particularly on Rogoff's planes (1995) to analyse the social practices of the community on three levels: the school institution (community plane), the students' relationships in the classroom (interpersonal plane) and the case studies of Nathan and Denis (personal plane). Rogoff's broad or community plane examines the purposes of the institution of school. Dewey (1938) argued that the development of character is built through our interpersonal relationships within a community, which deeply affects how we behave in the world. He was a strong advocate for the central role of teachers as agents of change to reshape

and improve society based on democratic values that promote the collective good (see Connell, 1980). The interpersonal plane examines the everyday events where individuals engage with each other. At this level, in this research, sociometry was used to examine how to create small supportive social groups which responded to existing interpersonal bonds to foster future opportunities for friendships. At the micro level, Rogoff's personal plane examines how students transform their understanding of and responsibility for activities. Through their own participation in class activities, students change and, in the process, become prepared to engage in subsequent similar activities. In this research the case studies of Denis and Nathan were used to examine how scaffolding various small groups supported changes in participation for these boys over one school year.

Whilst the three planes are first foregrounded separately, the integration of all three planes is required to provide a holistic analysis of the data. As such, Rogoff's planes (1995) are integrated into the analysis to examine how a collaborative community of practice was scaffolded in a primary classroom over a period of one school year. As scaffolding takes place in different contexts, such as the playground or classroom, and with multiple partners, the breadth and depth of the ZPDs can be affected. As such, a community of practice framework can promote understanding of how "multi tiered scaffolding" (Cumming-Potvin *et al.*, 2003) and learning occurs. More precisely, Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding and ZPDs can be positioned within the concept of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which Sun (2008) argues provides a more effective theoretical framework for classroom research.

This extended process complements a focus on the social context within Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice. Combining the concepts of multi-tiered scaffolding and ZPDs operating in a collaborative community of practice clarifies how student learning occurs. "The individual is not a passive absorber of culture but actively engages in the learning of the culture and its reshaping to make meaning for the individual" (Campbell, 2007, p. 138).

## **Research context**

The data that follows considers Rogoff's (1995) community plane as it is about the research school and the related government policies that impacted on the direction of the research. The state primary school site was situated in the northern metropolitan region of Perth, Western Australia at a time when values education was on the Commonwealth Government agenda. To develop and share effective whole school approaches for values education (Curriculum Corporation, 2008; DEEWR, 2009), the Commonwealth Government injected funding for values research projects across all Australian school sectors under the umbrella of the National Values Project (2002-2009). Some primary and secondary schools involved in these projects addressed social issues such as bullying (Australian Government, 2005) through whole school approaches to teaching values explicitly. To address pastoral care issues at the school where the study took place, staff agreed that a whole school values education approach was needed to meet all students' social and emotional needs; this approach supported

existing legislation in Western Australia, requiring that five core values be taught explicitly in all schools (Curriculum Council, 1998).

The school's national testing for literacy and numeracy (Curriculum Corporation, 2010) were evaluated as below the benchmark for acceptable literacy and numeracy levels; an analysis of school data by the administration confirmed that, since 2000, standardised testing results had declined on a yearly basis. Together with the declining academic results, there had been an increase in anti-social behaviour, resulting in pastoral care programs where volunteer adult mentors were assigned to individual students to provide guidance during instructional time. From 1999 to 2003, the commercial program 'You Can Do It!' (Bernard, 1996) was implemented with some success, but it did not curb persistent bullying in the school. At the same time, the school elected to participate in a pilot study for the WA based 'Friendly Schools Project' (Cross, 2010), in which students completed surveys to provide evidence about the nature and frequency of bullying incidents. As a requirement of this project, teachers organised activities to assist students in becoming more proactive about reporting bullying incidences. In response to the complexity of collecting data in a classroom, a combination of qualitative research methods was combined with an action research process to develop a *tribes community of practice*. (Gibbs, 2001)

### **Qualitative research design: Action research and *tribes community of practice***

Qualitative research methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002) was selected because non intrusive methods were required to fully understand students' points of view about their relationships. According to Richards (2005), qualitative data are complex and contextualised records of observations or interactions which are not easily reduced to numbers. These records are purposefully constructed by the researcher from a diverse range of sources; data are not just "lying around, like autumn leaves, ready to be swept into heaps" (Richards, 2005, p. 37). Because the teacher/researcher conducted this project in the normal context of her teaching duties, there were many demands on her time, therefore an action research process (Burns, 2005; Grundy, 1995; Tripp, 1995) was combined with qualitative methods to collect data in a systematic way that did not predetermine outcomes, but targeted data collection from authentic classroom activities.

The process of plan, negotiate, implement and reflect (see Tripp, 1995) provided flexibility to negotiate with diverse stakeholders in the community of practice and to take advantage of opportunities to gain feedback during the school year. As illustrated below, Table 1 summarises the frequency and range of data collected from diverse sources that were triangulated to examine how a collaborative community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) was developed to address bullying issues. The focus of data collection centred on the social practices of the classroom and student reflections to identify the cognitive shifts they were making towards pro-social relationships.

Table 1: Summary of the frequency and range of data

Daily	Weekly	Each term	Other
Teacher/researcher observations	Students' reflection logs	Formal parent interviews	Parent information nights
Informal interviews	School behaviour records	Parent surveys Sociograms	Student interviews-end of the project

The frequency and range of data sources provided rich information related to Rogoff's (1995) three planes. For example, data from parents not only held clues about their perception of the classroom community but also information about their child's development within and outside the classroom community. Similarly, triangulating students' data with parent information and teacher observations, as well as the content of student reflection logs, provided a clearer understanding of the students' cognitive shifts in behaviour. At a macro level, community data about behaviour collected by the school administration (mainly about playground events), was triangulated with sociogram outcomes and parent and teacher data to create social groups that supported all students' social and emotional growth.

As presented below in Table 2, by implementing diverse teaching and research tools, values were made explicit through the five class agreements: *attentive listening*, *mutual respect*, *participation or right to pass*, *appreciating others/ no put downs* (Gibbs, 2001) and *personal best* (Bernard, 1996). In order to use students' background knowledge and develop shared understandings, class charts were made to describe these five agreements. The teacher/researcher made reference regularly to these charts to further scaffold social understandings during the daily social circle and weekly class meeting (see Glasser, 1969). These teaching and resource tools provided valuable data about the classroom community of practice that evolved.

Table 2: Summary of diverse teaching and research tools

Teaching and research tools	Purpose of teaching and research tools
Class charts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Negotiated class agreements</li> <li>Established shared understandings</li> </ul>
Daily Social circle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developed vocabulary to express feelings</li> <li>Promoted a safe and caring culture</li> </ul>
Weekly Class meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encouraged a democratic process of participative decision-making</li> <li>Built a collaborative community</li> </ul>

The three cyclical stages of Gibbs' (2001) Tribes process provided a framework to develop the necessary skills towards a community of practice. The first stage, *inclusion*, provided ideas about team building before the first tribe was formed. Even though team building activities continued throughout the year, the focus shifted to student leadership skills to develop the second stage, *influence*. In this stage students learnt how to listen to other people's points of view and to solve problems. The last

stage, *community*, was built throughout the year by using a daily social circle to promote a safe classroom and weekly class meetings to encourage students to take responsibility for their behaviour and learning.

Tribes (Gibbs, 2001) Learning Community ideas were adapted to create a process that complemented the development of a collaborative community of practice. At an interpersonal level, using sociograms promoted a feeling of togetherness because the formation of groups was based primarily on students' social and emotional needs. Embedding pro-social values further, sociograms were used to encourage students to develop wider friendship networks by nominating three peers from both genders with whom they would like to form a friendship. The first nomination was used to place students in their tribe; the other nominations were used if the final grouping would result in students being placed with non-supportive peers, as in the case of Nathan being placed with Denis. Each new social group or tribe provided authentic opportunities for students to develop new friendships and experience the positive attributes of their peers. Assumptions were made that when a child's interpersonal preferences are used, new groups have the potential to be more cohesive and social adjustment is enhanced (Ashman & Gillies, 2003; Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001; Bennett, Rolheiser & Stevahn, 1991). Iverson, Barton and Iverson, (1997) also concluded that there were no adverse effects on students when using sociograms.

### **Presentation of data: Sociograms and school behaviour records**

In this section, extracts from the school and class data for Nathan and Denis are presented to provide comparisons, prior to discussing the case studies at a micro level. Collecting data from a variety of sources provided a more accurate reflection of how interpersonal relationships were developing. For this reason, data emanating from school behaviour records were combined with the sociograms, classroom behaviour records and teacher/researcher observations to further categorise a student's overall behaviour as either pro-social or anti-social each term. This criterion was considered important when the classroom focus was to develop pro-social behaviour.

There were five rounds of Tribes and sociograms during the year, with one occurring each Term except in Term 2 when there were two rounds of Tribes. Denis's peer nominations for each sociogram [3, 4, 0, 2 and 2] and Nathan's [1, 0, 1, 1, and 1] reveal that they received peer nominations for most rounds of Tribes with one exception each, both occurring in Term 2. The students who nominated Denis and Nathan were mainly the same group which played with the boys in the playground (Teacher reflection log, Terms 1, 2, 3 & 4, 2004). Denis received a larger number of peer nominations than Nathan but remained in the anti-social category each Term. Even though Denis did not have playground behaviour records in Term 4, he reverted occasionally to anti-social behaviours in the classroom (Teacher observations, Term 4, 2004). Nathan remained in the positive behaviour category for each Term, except for Term 2. At the beginning of Term 2, Nathan was becoming more assertive in the playground and retaliated when he was verbally abused by his peers (School behaviour records, Term 2, 2004). When Denis was not nominated in Term 2, his usual group of friends had chosen other peers from their new pro-social network (Sociograms, Tribes

3, Term 2, 2004). At the same time Denis's anti-social behaviour was escalating, as evidenced by his 12 recorded misdemeanours (School Behaviour Records - SBR, Term 2, 2004) (see Table 3 below).

All teachers who were on playground duty systematically recorded bullying incidents which identified the students involved and provided a written record to all teachers each week. These records confirmed the ongoing bullying and/or victimisation incidents with a large group of male students across four Year 5 classes, including the research class. As there appeared to be few positive student role models, the challenge for the teacher/researcher was how to break this cycle of bullying in a way that would develop student responsibility and commitment towards pro-social goals.

Table 3: Extracts from school behaviour records

Year 5 boys	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4
Nathan	6	4	2	0
Denis	6	12	6	0

Both Nathan and Denis had six SBR records in Term 1, with Denis initiating bullying behaviour towards Nathan. However, from Term 2 onwards, Nathan developed friendships which included boys who usually participated in bullying behaviours with Denis. From this point on, Nathan's playground records indicated a continual decline, providing evidence that his new friends may have also become a protective factor to prevent students such as Denis engaging in anti-social behaviour with Nathan.

In Term 2, Denis's anti-social behaviour escalated, when most of his peers had made a decision not to engage in anti-social behaviour. Denis's closest friend, Lindsay, befriended Nathan. Lindsay also requested not to be placed in the same group as Denis. Articulating his thoughts, Lindsay commented: 'I want to keep my nose clean' (Student reflection log, Term 1, 2004). Denis did not follow his peers in adopting pro-social behaviour as in the past he had held the 'balance of power' with his peers, which one could argue, he was now losing. Despite Denis's resistance to adopt pro-social goals, the teacher/researcher recognised potential leadership qualities, for Denis remained popular with the majority of his friends, as evidenced in peer nominations from the sociograms each Term. It appeared that Denis was able to elicit loyalty from his peers, even though they chose not to engage with him in anti-social behaviour.

While the two case study students, Nathan and Denis, showed a significant decline in reported behaviour records by the end of the year, their journeys during the school year were quite different. Extracts from student reflection logs, parent surveys and interviews and teacher/researcher observation logs and reflection are examined in their journeys.

### **Nathan's journey**

From the beginning of the school year, Nathan, as evidenced in his body posture and general demeanour, could be described as a nervous student, who lacked confidence



(Teacher observations, Term 1, 2004). During the first parent interview in Term 1, Nathan's parents requested that he be separated from another student, who was his only friend at the time. They perceived the association with this student as preventing Nathan from making new friends. To support Nathan his parents were also accessing professional help (Teacher Reflection Log, Term 1, 2004).

Nathan was often the last person to be seated during lessons when students formed a circle for class discussions. This situation may have gone unnoticed but it occurred several times during the first weeks of Term 1. The teacher/researcher remarked that to prevent Nathan from sitting down, Denis signalled to his peers by using hand gestures to suggest that all spaces had been taken. The teacher/researcher made connections that Nathan's nervous disposition and lack of friends was due to repeated instances where students such as Denis colluded with their peers to exclude Nathan at every opportunity. Reflecting on Slee's definition (2003) of bullying where there is an 'imbalance of power' as in the case of Nathan and Denis, Nathan experienced physical, verbal and psychological abuse at the hands of Denis. When Nathan tried to participate in class discussions, the teacher/researcher observed Denis 'rolling his eyes' and heard him whisper to his peers 'loser' to indicate his disrespect for Nathan (Teacher observations, Term 1, 2004). In definitions of bullying, reference is also made to 'repeated instances over time'. For Nathan it had been over several years, where his self-worth had been eroded and his peers demonstrated little respect or compassion for him.

As the year progressed, Nathan chose to stay mainly on the fringes of groups, even though more students were willing to befriend him. During Term 2, Nathan's parents realised Nathan needed support and that a leadership role might assist him to develop more friendships.

I think at times Nathan is quiet and a bit of a loner. I would like to see him try to be a leader in the hope of changing some things. I think groups are all right if all in the group get a fair go. Groups based on friendship are all right if the work and learning still gets completed. Nathan doesn't seem to want to mix too much. I'm not sure if he is mature for his age. At home he has tantrums and seems to fight and argue with his sister over childish things. (Parent survey: Responses from Nathan's parents, Term 2, 2004)

It took time for Nathan to develop trust, but he did make friends who supported him as a vice leader in two Tribes towards the end of the study. As illustrated below, Nathan's reflections from Terms 3 and 4 revealed that he was beginning to understand the skills he needed to develop mature participation and control his behaviour.

If you are mad your friends will not want to play with you. I think we should have a lot more self control. When someone treats you unfairly you have lots of choices. I think that you if you got teased or got bullied that you should walk away and have some time out. You can go and talk to a teacher or if it is really important you can go to the principal and talk about it. You can laugh it off and walk away. (Student reflection log, Nathan, 19.8.04 - Term 3)

I have felt included in the playground and in my group. Our group has been getting along. I try to be a good friend by not being bossy. (Student reflection log, Nathan, 28.10.04- Term 4)

A good leader has to be honest, caring, obedient and trustworthy. I was the sitter and now I am the helper. I want to be the ideas person more (Leadership survey, Nathan, 25.11.04, Term 4)

By the end of the year, Nathan shifted from being on the periphery of group work to fuller engagement or mature participation. He developed confidence to express his ideas and realised that his peers would listen because he had gained their respect.

### **Denis's journey**

From the beginning of the year, Denis, as evidenced in his body posture and general demeanour, could be described as a confident student, who had a wide social group of friends that followed his lead in the playground and classroom (Teacher observations, Term 1, 2004). During the first parent interview in Term 1, Denis's mother expressed concern that her son's behaviour was "out of control" (Parent interview, Term 1, 2004). She was aware of his anti-social behaviour at school and the negative impact it was having on his school work. After three months at school, Denis made a positive shift in his thinking about class activities. He wrote: "My group is fabulous because we get on with our work" (Denis's reflection log, 29.4.04), which encouraged the teacher/researcher who also noted more occasions where Denis was being cooperative in class activities (Teacher observation log, Term1, 2004).

As evidenced in the school's behaviour records from the first half of the year, it took longer for Denis than most of his peers to adopt the values of the classroom community. There were glimpses of positive changes when Denis completed school work in class and allowed others to speak without making audible comments to intimidate whoever was speaking. He enjoyed group work and the support of his peers which indicated that his friendships were important to him. Still, Denis found it difficult to relate to students whom he had bullied in the past, such as Nathan. The following two examples from Term 3 and 4 illustrate the severity of Denis's disrespect for Nathan.

I have been punching, kicking and pushing Nathan in the line. In the playground I have been fighting with Nathan. (Denis's reflection log, 9.8.04, Term 3)

On a regular basis, opportunities were provided in the classroom community for all students to receive 'lift ups' (positive messages) from each other. Despite Denis's anti-social behaviour he received 'lift ups' from students such as Lindsay, who were now positive role models. When Denis noticed that his friend Lindsay was talking to Nathan and being friendly, Denis wrote in his reflection log on the same day:

He (Lindsay) was a good friend with 'N\*A\*T\*H\*A\*N- hee hee. (Student reflection log, 28.10.04, Term 4)

Nathan's name was written in large letters and followed by the words 'hee, hee' which Denis used when he was teasing other students. A couple of weeks later, in Term 4, Denis wrote that he was enjoying working with others and appreciated the support, which is evidence that he had made cognitive shifts about his behaviour. He developed the skills of collaboration, which required him to cooperate with others and take turns. Realising the benefits of being a leader, Denis regretted that he was not given the opportunity by his peers as it may have motivated him to adopt pro-social goals sooner.

I enjoyed group work because you get to do it together and not on your own. I learned to get along and take turns. I wasn't voted leader and I wanted to be because I wanted to have a go. I would have had to behave more and I would have. (Denis's interview, 12.11.04, Term 4)

Denis's responses in the Term 4 leadership survey (25.11.04) revealed an awareness of the parameters for acceptable behaviour: "Leaders are good and don't muck around". Still, Denis continually challenged the leaders in his group. He saw his group role as being a joker, but would like to be the ideas person. At the final parent night in Term 4, Denis's mother reported that he had improved his behaviour at school and home. During the evening, the teacher also observed Denis sitting next to his mother attentively and respectfully, which sharply contrasted to his behaviour during the teacher/researcher interview at the beginning of the year (Teacher observations, 29.11.04).

## **Discussion**

The theoretical background to this article conceptualises the learner as a historical and cultural subject positioned within a social network where they are a member of multiple communities of practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1995). Central to this concept is the assumption that when students interact with others, collective ZPDs are created and opportunities for multi-tiered scaffolding occur (Cumming-Potvin et al., 2003; Vygotsky, 1968). In the present study, the social practices were embedded in a culture of caring, sharing and collaboration. Rogoff's (1995) planes framed the analysis to interpret how the data provided evidence of Nathan and Denis's cognitive shift in behaviour towards pro-social behaviour and mature participation.

At an institutional/ school level, commercial and mentoring programs were integrated in the behaviour management and pastoral care policies to support students' social and emotional well-being. As a result of involvement in the Friendly Schools Project (Cross, 2010) teachers developed an understanding of the complexity of bullying and victim issues and the need to involve all stakeholders in the solutions. Student-centred pedagogies, such as collaborative learning (Hart, 1992) combined with Tribes Learning Community of practice (Gibbs, 2001) provided the context to negotiate these changes in the research class. By drawing on students' social networks through the research tool of sociograms, these pedagogies allowed the teacher/researcher to use alternative approaches to building positive relationships. Particularly at the beginning of the year, because mutual respect and empathy were not core values reflected in many students' behaviour, a pro-active approach was needed.

At an interpersonal/classroom level, the introduction of Tribes Learning Community of practice (Gibbs, 2001) provided a context where students negotiated class agreements that made transparent the social issues in the classroom and the gaps in students' social knowledge. Social practices such as the weekly class meeting and the daily social circle provided a more explicit approach to identify discriminatory practices, to support every child's right for respectful relationships. Placing Nathan and Denis in different groups to widen their circle of friends also allowed multi-tiered scaffolding to occur with different peers who acted as role models. When teachers understand the sequential nature of developing classroom groups and can accurately diagnose the skills of group members, as with the use of sociograms in this research, they can influence growth in a planned and productive way (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1983). For Denis and Nathan, ZPDs (Vygotsky, 1978) were extended when they were placed with peers from whom they could learn effective leadership skills such as Lindsay, who was a group leader and later became a mutual friend of both boys. Teacher/researcher intervention was critical to scaffold students' social understandings to redress an imbalance of power between Nathan and Denis.

At a personal level, a focus on the creating positive social networks supported students' aspirations to make more friends and develop mature participation in the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For students to engage in this challenging process, they needed a willingness to negotiate with each other and to co-construct their understandings of their relationships within new parameters of mutual respect. The personal journeys of Denis and Nathan illustrate the complex issues involved when parent, student, and teacher perceptions are explored and challenged. For Nathan mature participation resulted in developing greater self-confidence and assertiveness to make more friends. In contrast, for Denis mature participation was developing compassion and tolerance and redirecting energies to form new relationships, based on mutual respect.

Prior to the interventions of this study, the effects of ongoing bullying for Nathan had been extreme, with the need to seek professional help for managing conflict. He had been undermined by Denis for a prolonged period so the teacher/researcher needed to be aware that it would take time for him to re-establish his self-confidence and respect. Nathan's parents also needed to change their views about student leadership. As Nathan became a happier child at home, who was more optimistic about learning at school, his parents supported the cognitive shifts he was making to become more assertive. As illustrated in an extract below, taken from his interview, Nathan developed new strategies and friendships, which improved his attitude towards formal learning.

It has been better this year because I haven't been getting in trouble a lot like last year. I was in trouble last year for fighting with Michael and Denis because I keep away from them. I think school is pretty fun because I play with Damon. Peter is friendly with me because he doesn't tease me. (Student interview, Nathan, 9.11.04)

As Denis reflected on his interactions with his peers, he changed his attitude to develop a reputation based on his positive attributes and became happier to be at school: "I

have been happy to come to school because there's nothing to do at home and I have friends at school" (Student interview, Denis, 11.11.04). This long term process allowed Denis to experience the positive aspects of a wider social network in the classroom where it was unacceptable to behave in an anti-social manner. These experiences translated into pro-social playground behaviour, where it became the norm not to bully others. Although Denis had more freedom to choose to continue to bully others in the playground, as the year progressed, his peers and friends became more proactive in reporting bullying incidences to the teachers. This fact may have deterred Denis. However, at another level Denis was now happier coming to school to be with his friends, which one could argue, was the determining factor in his cognitive shift to cease bullying others.

## **Conclusion**

Few would refute the benefits of assisting students to develop communication skills to learn to solve social issues and develop friendships (Battistich & Watson, 2003; Chilcott & Gregg, 2009). The question is not whether intervention should occur when bullying is happening (Rigby, 2003) but what is the most effective process to address the problem and provide lasting solutions. This teacher/researcher utilised a practical approach through explicit and targeted scaffolding of social knowledge framed within a Tribes Learning Community of practice (Gibbs, 2001). Students developed new shared understandings about the social responsibility to redress an imbalance of power (Slee, 2003) and became proactive in preventing bullying because there was a focus on the social practices in the classroom. For the teacher/researcher, collaborating with students to encourage mature participation through scaffolding became a motivating factor to continue engaging in a demanding outcomes-related process (Morcom & MacCallum, 2009). Results spanning the school year indicated that Nathan developed confidence to make new friends and become more assertive. Although Denis took longer than his peers to adopt pro-social goals, he refrained from bullying towards the end of the school year. These results support other research focussing on social networks and peer groups of bullies and victims to provide alternative approaches to resolve such issues (Cross, 2010).

Despite this project's limitations, which are linked to the small number of participants in a case study approach, these findings have implications for how schools are structured. It is every student's right and responsibility to learn in a safe and supportive environment. Creating classroom opportunities for collaborative and independent work (Antil, Jenkins, Wayne & Vadasay, 1998; Gillies, 2003; Gillies & Ashman, 1996) as well as mechanisms for negotiating the meaning of working in each of these contexts (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992), necessitates engagement in courageous conversations about values. From a theoretical perspective, drawing on Rogoff's three planes to examine these complex issues on a community, interpersonal and personal level, offered a holistic approach to translate theory into practice and scaffold ZPDs for a caring and collaborative community of practice.

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