Article

Cooperative Learning in Swedish Classrooms: Engagement and Relationships as a Focus for Culturally Diverse Students

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Abstract: The ongoing refugee crisis makes intercultural competence and culturally responsive education crucial issues in schools. At the same time, increased migration poses new challenges for social cohesion in countries around the world. How schools and classrooms can be fair and inclusive in terms of experiences and outcomes for migrant and refugee students is therefore a key question. This paper will explore the increase in migration of newly arrived students in Sweden, and how teachers in this country are catering for diverse students through cooperative learning. I explore cooperative learning as an inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy that can be effectively used in schools to support all students and especially 'refugee' or newly arrived students. Using theory from cooperative learning and Stembridge (2020) as a theoretical framework, I particularly focus on analysis using two of Stembridge's themes of Culturally Responsive Education: *Engagement* and *Relationships* to analyze Swedish primary school classroom observations and teacher interviews and find commonalities between these two themes and the key ideas in cooperative learning. This research is built on the premise that there is more need in education research for up to date observations into the classroom factors that support or hinder learning and the way that within-class groupings can support diversity and inclusivity. Cooperative learning allows participants to develop a commitment to fairness, social responsibility and a concern for others and this particularly caters for our diverse student populations.

Keywords: culturally responsive education; cooperative learning; relationships; engagement; inclusivity; diversity; newly arrived; refugee

1. Introduction

The UN Refugee Agency's figures show that there were 79.5 million displaced people worldwide at the end of 2019. Refugees who have fled their countries to escape conflict and persecution accounted for 26 million, with more than half being under the age of 18, reaching a record high, with the highest increase being between 2012 and 2015 due to the Syrian conflict (UNHCR, 2019). The provision of educational opportunities is seen as one of the highest priorities for refugee communities [1] yet research into refugee education has been described as a wasteland [2] little focus on how to best educate such a diverse and marginalized group. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations in 2015 includes 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), with a comprehensive global goal on education (SDG4). SDG4 on education is to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" [3]. This is a key focus of this paper which argues cooperative learning is an inclusive pedagogy and provides students with lifelong skills including social and emotional skills. When students are engaged in cooperative work with shared engagement, this can contribute to effective social inclusion due to intergroup contact [4].

It is important that we not only ensure that Interculturalism allows refugee, migrants, and newly arrived peoples to live side by side with each other harmoniously in society, but that we also provide such an environment in classrooms with our students able to live together in harmony with improved dialogue and fruitful relationships [5,6]. Now more than ever we need to ensure our multicultural societies construct the kinds of 'spaces that need to reflect and incorporate the diversity of their citizens, including those who cross their borders as refugees and immigrants' [7]. He has long argued for the need for equity pedagogy, which he says exists when teachers use techniques and teaching methods that facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial and ethnic groups and from all social classes. Using teaching techniques that cater to the learning and cultural styles of diverse groups and using the techniques of cooperative learning are some of the methods that teachers have found effective with students from diverse racial, ethnic, and language groups [8].

Schools, in particular, have the responsibility to help refugees as they can be seen as 'the major avenue by which students with refugee experiences can be acculturated [and can] provide environments which are inclusive, tolerant and accepting of difference' [9]. It is equally important that we recognize that all students have unique experiences including histories, life experience and different beliefs which enrich our classrooms. Culturally responsive pedagogies which 'respond to students' identities by respecting, valuing and drawing on these attributes and rich histories and lived experiences' [10] can help to bridge the gap between these home experiences with school [11].

Some Definitions of the Terms

The country of study in this research project is Sweden. There are different terms used throughout the world for students who are sometimes known as newly arrived or refugee students and also as asylum seekers. I chose to use the term newly arrived students as the study is situated in Sweden and this is the term used in schools. Nilsson and Bunar [12] provide definitions of the terms according to Swedish schooling systems:

> *In Sweden, the educational authorities (Skolinspektionen, 2009, 2014; Skolverket, 2008; Utbildningsdepartementet, Ds:2013:6) define a newly arrived student as a student who has migrated for any reason (for example, as a refugee, for family reunion, or labour migration), who does not possess basic knowledge of the Swedish language, and who starts school just prior to or during the regular academic year.* (see Bunar, 2010)

Nilsson and Bunar [12] further state the need for teachers to understand that not all newly arrived or refugee students are the same,

> *Migrant children are heterogeneous in regard to pre-migration factors, such as social and educational background, family relations, and upbringing in a rural or urban area, as well as trans-migration factors, including the reason for migration (voluntarily or forced), experiences of war, persecution and trauma, background from a country with a long-lasting war or warlike situation (for example, Afghanistan and Somalia), or a country where sudden crises caused a large-scale flight.* (such as Iraq after 2003 or Syria after 2011)

The influx of refugees during 2015 increased the number of foreign-born individuals in Sweden by 163,000 [13]. This has been reported as the greatest proportion of refugee migration in Sweden to date [14]. McIntyre et al. [15] provide a good policy context of the Swedish system for newly arrived students demonstrating how Swedish schooling systems and policy favors inclusion:

> *A cross-party refugee agreement in 2015 outlined policies for ensuring that all schools be prepared to receive newly arrived students (Proposition 2015/16:184, 12), that municipalities should place students in a range of schools to avoid segregation and that support for students in their mother tongue should be provided.* [15]

Every fourth (24.9%) resident in Sweden has an immigrant background and every third (32.3%) has at least one parent born abroad. Migration can have a longer lasting effect on people than just the initial effects of arriving in a new country with different cultural and language expectations. Research has shown that, 'childhood immigration and the timing of this event after an early period of childhood socialization and optimal learning may trigger adverse life-course trajectories that leave a lasting impact on adult socioeconomic attainments' [16]. It has also been shown that region of origin also has an effect, with immigrants arriving from low income region origins resulting in longer lasting impacts. This demonstrates that teachers should be aware of this sensitive period in newly arrived students' lives and support these students in an inclusive cooperative learning environment at school.

As newly arrived students are challenged due to speaking different languages at home and school, as well as requiring more support in schools to help with their learning [17] they also need to help overcome the longer lasting effects migration can have by being further supported in schools with teachers that that understand and use Translanguaging (developed from the Welsh term Trawsieithu). This is the 'strategy of planned and systematic use of two languages for teaching and learning inside the same lesson in bilingual education' [17]. This allows students to see the respect and appreciation the school has of their multilingual capabilities.

An equity pedagogy, such as cooperative learning, is needed: this creates citizens committed to social justice with an understanding of intercultural competence and on the need to build attitudes and dispositions which link, rather than compete with, others. At the same time we need to understand also as educators the complexities of diversities and lenses of identity that illustrate the need to understand diversity in a nuanced way, and that this notion of diversity is a strength in our classroom [10]. The results of a recent survey, Diversity Barometer (2016), have shown that in Sweden, 'In general, attitudes toward cultural diversity and migration became more negative compared to the results of similar studies carried out during 2005–2014 . . . those who have had less contact and experience of interacting with foreigners have a more negative attitude toward migration' [13]. There is a general pattern found from this survey whereby young people have more positive attitudes towards diversity. If cultural and ethnic diversity are perceived negatively in schools by students and their parents this can 'lead to both an increase in and normalization/legitimization of discrimination and social exclusion of certain groups, which in turn may aggravate tensions, conflicts and even violence in different segments of society' [13]. This is an important point. I argue all students are heterogeneous in regard to their social, educational and family backgrounds and we need to particularly ensure we do not create educational spaces which exclusively privilege the majority culture.

Risannen [18] has noted the change in Sweden to a Multiculturalist orientation in educational discourses from one of assimilationism with cultural needs of different groups now more likely to be addressed. An increased use of cooperative learning that teachers in Sweden are embracing may well be changing young people's attitudes to diversity. A cooperative learning Facebook page for teachers in Sweden https://www.facebook.com/groups/kooperativt now has 25,000 members. The group's purpose is to provide support for teachers about how collaboration between students can be used to strengthen learning. The number of PhD theses written on cooperative learning in the past few years has also increased dramatically, with 66 produced in the past three years (http://www.diva-portal.org/) so it is both a popular and well researched pedagogy in Sweden, as well as being widely used in Swedish classrooms. Having positive attitudes to diversity is important if we want our students to develop intercultural competence and thrive in a diverse world. Intercultural competence is seen as "a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" [19] I argue that cooperative learning helps to develop these abilities.

2. Twenty-First Century Pedagogies to Support a Globalized World

An equity pedagogy has long been argued for but more recent arguments for twenty-first century pedagogy imply a new way of learning and teaching, a way that assists and enhances a different

set of beliefs and theories more appropriate for a new century—a globalized century. There is some consensus that students of current educational institutions 'will need to function well in the globalized world in terms of competition for opportunities and collaboration with individuals from different cultures' [20]. As a result of globalization, twenty-first century students need to be interconnected and interdependent to address global issues such as human rights abuses [21,22] and understand the key challenges facing our globalized world.

Education for the 21st century needs to develop students' skills that allow them to move between workplaces and develop the metacognitive skills necessary to do this well. These skills are not simply memorization and repetition but include social skills and attitude sets. Twenty-first century skills have been described often as being the 4Cs, comprised of Communication, Collaboration, Critical thinking and Problem-solving, and Creativity and Innovation. These skills help our students engage with the global economy [23,24] and global problem-solving [25]. Some authors have argued that these four skills can actually be developed into ten skills, especially when students are involved in teaching and learning activities driven by problem solving and in a world with ICT [26]. Two of these skills particularly relevant to cooperative learning are cross/intercultural competence and co-responsibility. 'Cross/inter-cultural competence addresses learners' capacity to communicate, collaborate and work in multicultural and global environments. Co-responsibility refers to a culture of sharing that necessitates shifting to less ego-centric principles and practices' [26], pp. 5–6. These skills are now even more needed with the added social challenge our word is facing, 'As the global population continues to grow migration, urbanisation and increasing social and cultural diversity are reshaping countries and communities' [27]. This report on the future of education by the OECD states that education needs to be about equipping, 'students with the skills they need to become active, responsible and engaged citizens'. They list social and emotional skills (e.g., empathy, self-efficacy and collaboration) as some of these important skills. Skills such as collaboration, as well as flexibility, adaptability and initiative, global awareness and citizenship are important skills according to the OECD [28]. We need our students to develop these essential skills in diverse classrooms, to be globally competent, and it is important that we consider the kinds of classrooms in which this can occur.

Culturally responsive pedagogies need to be taught by teachers who understand how to develop students' 21st century skills which also include the understanding of the sixth pillars for 21st century learning. These include Delors [29] four pillars learning to know, learning to be, learning to live together and learning to do, and UNESCO's fifth pillar learning to transform oneself and society [30] and a more recently added one learning to give and share [26]. This paper focuses on one such pedagogy for equity that incorporates a number of these six pillars, cooperative learning. Three particularly relevant ones in are 'learning to be', 'learning to live together' and 'learning to transform oneself and society'. Learning to be involves developing 'one's personality and be able to act with greater autonomy, judgment, and personal responsibility. This relates to personal skills and dignity' [31] and learning to live together involves developing 'an understanding of other people and their history, traditions, and spirituality, in order to participate and cooperate with others in all human activities. This has to do with social skills and social capital' [31]. Learning to transform oneself and society has links to cooperative learning as it is about developing 'respect for the environment, for social solidarity, and for a nondiscriminatory, gender-sensitive world' [31].

2.1. Culturally Responsive Education for Equity: Developing 21st Century Skills Like Collaboration through Cooperative Learning

This paper explores how cooperative learning is used in schools in Sweden, a country which has had a significant number of refugee students arriving in the past few years. The use of cooperative learning is a way of creating a classroom ambience, or democracy stance [32,33] in that classroom in which there is genuinely opportunity for all. Hek [34] argues from the UK experience that, "It is not an exaggeration to say that refugee children's well-being depends to a major degree on their school

experiences, successes and failures ... . [and] Educational progress and emotional well-being are mutually dependent" (p. 29).

Cooperative learning is about learning together in small groups (learning to live together) and is about the way teachers develop the relationships in that classroom and create a particular environment, or 'that certain climate' [35] using methods and strategies to maximize participation and engagement from all students. The UK SPRinG program also found that group work can particularly help relationships and social inclusion [36]. This is further supported by research that confirms small group learning 'is very useful help for the marginalized children to be incorporated into their team' [37].

Cooperative learning is important in diverse classrooms. Cooperative learning is a particular type of group work and the benefits of using this have been researched over decades. Diversity can bring social problems and conflict if teachers do not consider this when new students arrive in their classrooms. Positive social and emotional development lays the foundations for wellbeing and good mental health and so this is also an important focus for schools [38,39] especially with newly arrived or refugee students who may have experienced trauma and change. Cooperative learning experiences can be used to increase students' cooperative predispositions leading to pro-social behaviors and reducing bullying and harm intended aggression in students [40]. Interactions among students are crucial to cooperative learning and the interactions that occur in the groups help to facilitate learning [41] with positive relationships occurring as students not only help each other but also enhance thinking.

One of the major spin-offs from such improved relationships in the classroom is ensuring that all students are included in learning. When teachers actively include all pupils through identifying individual strengths and giving them roles in groups, then it recognizes diversity as a learning resource and changes the conditions that influence students' participation in the classroom [42,43]. This equity is fundamental to an intercultural classroom. A cooperative classroom can also enhance such a classroom of tolerance. As students learn to appreciate the skills of others and as they are positively connected in their learning tasks, they become more tolerant of students they may have otherwise not appreciated. Students are able to develop 'learning to be' as they develop personal skills when working in cooperative groups. Empathy and the ability to trust others in their group is developed and enhanced in such classrooms.

An important aspect of developing a collaborative learning space is also the work of teachers who develop caring spaces for their students. Care can be developed through supportive and cooperative pedagogies used by teachers. As argued by Sellars [44],

Caring is not just to be read about, discussed or subtly mandated as part of a hidden curriculum (Giroux and Penna, 1979), it is practised as collaborative, not competitive learning. It is a daily, ongoing commitment to explicit, strategic pedagogical approaches for engaging students with each other in positive and mutually supportive interactions.

Caring goes hand in hand with teachers who want to develop good relationships with their students. As Noddings [45] argues, "If we cared deeply about fostering growth and shaping both acceptable and caring people, we could surely find ways to extend contact between teachers and students. There is no good reason why teachers should not stay with one group of students for three years rather than one in the elementary years." (p. 224). Noddings goes on to argue "an ethic of caring, involves modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation" (p. 222). Teacher modelling of caring occurs when they encourage their students to recognize and value themselves; when they have open dialogue; when they encourage students to practice care towards others; and demonstrate high expectations of their students by affirming what they know about them and by allowing them to grow accordingly. This comes from teachers having a genuine and thorough knowledge of each of their students, developed over time. Relationships take time to build and this notion of keeping students with their teachers for three years is apparent in many of the Swedish classrooms I visited.

2.2. Culturally Responsive Education for Equity: Engagement and Relationships through Cooperative Learning

Culturally responsive teaching can be seen as 'using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them' [46]. Culturally responsive education (CRE) has recently been defined as 'a framework that is useful for closing Equity gaps in school achievement outcomes' [47]. Stembridge goes on to argue that as teachers we have the choice of what to teach, the pedagogies we use and that the 'strategies we choose in teaching should reflect the needs of our learners (Equity) ... and Equity isn't possible without the element of connection' (p. 27, 28). It is important then that the school spaces, the classrooms, that these students are in, have teachers who are culturally responsive [48] as well as necessary to explore the kinds of practices used by teachers who demonstrate connection. 'Our students and the communities we serve must feel connected to us, and we are better teachers when we are connected to them' [47].

2.3. Stembridge's Themes of Culturally Responsive Education

Examining the six themes of culturally responsive education [47] allows us to see these 'as essential for the bridging of Equity and pedagogy' (p. 67). This article will examine two of the six themes being *Engagement* and *Relationships* (you can read more about the other four themes in Stembridge [47] (pp. 60–115) as these two themes were the ones that were seen as predominant in the data during analysis as well as mostly being closely matched to other aspects of the literature about cooperative learning. Stembridge argues that although they can be seen as separate components they should also be seen as 'an interrelated ecosystems of intellections' (p. 67). I will therefore briefly describe the other four themes.

1. Cultural identity: is both a fluid and large concept and the practices of Culturally Responsive education should 'affirm students' sense of selves by bridging their cultural and academic identities' (p. 86). Stembridge further argues that it is about feeling about belonging to a group, including a social group which can be seen as important in the classroom when students become part of a cooperative learning group.

2. Vulnerability is defined in relation to an understanding of students' exposure to risk factors and these include 'circumstances and conditions that we think of as having a mitigating effect on the likelihood for school success' (p. 93) with protective factors being things that help to mitigate the risk These include teachers who have compassion and insights to empower any of our students who might have these risk factor. Stembridge draws on social science literature to outline what these risk factors include: '(1) family background—especially low education and income level of parents; (2) limited access to social networks that hold economic, relational, and experiential resources and (3) inconsistent access to high-quality schools and educational services (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d)' (p. 93). Stembridge argues that with this concept of vulnerability goes our own vulnerability as teachers who are willing and able to be vulnerable and find and facilitate connections for and with our students. As teachers new need to not only seek methods to support students from all backgrounds but also consider what protective factors might be in place to mitigate risks as well as consider our instructional design to encourage our students to make connections and take risks in an environment that is safe.

3. Assets is explained as how students' strengths (in terms of process and content knowledge as well as interests and dispositions) are used in instruction as well as how students are encouraged to understand their own strengths and tendencies (p. 96). Stembridge further argues that 'brilliant teachers calibrate their pedagogy to maximise their engagement without lowering their expectations for students' learning' (p. 97). He also argues that we need to be aware that our perceptions of our students' assets 'are centred around our own experiences, indoctrinations, and fluencies.' (p. 102).

4.　　The final of Stembridge's' four themes that will be described briefly here is that of rigor. Stembridge describes rigor as being 'whatever we do in instruction with students, whatever ways in which we frame and deliver their opportunities to learn-what we offer in the content of the experience-must be substantive and meaningful" (p. 103). He further argues that cognitive engagement and rigor help to reinforce each other.

2.4. Engagement and Relationships

Now I will explore more fully the two themes that will be used for analysis in this article: *Engagement and Relationships* alongside the literature that links these themes to other research and in particular research on cooperative learning. Engagement is defined as being the most valuable commodity in the interest of learning, as being engaged is needed by our students for us to have a chance to teach them. Stembridge goes on to explain the importance of context with engagement as 'human beings are highly social species and interpersonal and cultural contexts matter' (p. 71). There are three types of engagement according to Stembridge [47]: (behavioral, affective and cognitive) and they are not mutually exclusive (See Table 1).

Table 1. Types of engagement as a theme and goal for culturally responsive education (CRE).

Behavioral Engagement can be thought of as the physical investments that students make in their learning. In the simplest terms, behavioral engagement entails the students' willingness to follow the rules and accept the behavioural guidelines in instructional spaces.
In classrooms, affective engagement looks like interest (versus boredom), active (versus passive) learning, and the students feeling of belonging to the school community (versus a sense of isolation).
Cognitive engagement can be thought of as the intellectual investments that students make in their learning. It speaks to the extent and intensity of self-regulation in attending to one's own learning, and also the willingness and ability to be strategic in the building of understandings and completion of tasks.

When students are affectively engaged Stembridge argues 'they are more likely to be cognitively and behaviourally engaged as well' (p. 74). Stembridge further argues that our students can best manage their own engagement when they are taught and supported and given the tools and techniques to engage.

Stembridge's second theme of culturally responsive education is *Relationships*. Stembridge argues that, 'relationships are particularly vital for students with more exposure to the elements of social, economic and educational disadvantage—relationships for them are the channel through which their investment with school is personalized' (p. 88). There is a wealth of research into the impact of relationships on students' achievements and performance at school and I argue too that using cooperative learning with students is a way of building relationships.

2.5. Cooperative Learning and Engagement and Relationships

Research into the benefits of cooperative learning has identified a number of outcomes that can be related to engagement and relationships. Language minority children can especially benefit from cooperative learning as a culturally responsive pedagogy [50]. Students with diverse needs and backgrounds, such as migrant and newly arrived students, need a safe and secure space to learn where they feel valued [51].

In a cooperative learning environment, students are more likely to be engaged [52–55]. Engagement occurs in these classrooms when teachers teach the tools and techniques to engage; for example, teachers who support their students by highlighting and teaching small group and interpersonal skills, are also able to develop engagement by using cooperative learning structures that support the specific skills.

Trusting relationship building is crucial, especially when teachers want to develop students who learn to respect other students whose values and ideas might differ to their own [56]. Cooperative

learning requires this careful teaching of social skills in order to improve social skill development [57–62] and this in turn helps to develop relationships as students work together better when their social skills are well developed. Cooperative learning has a lasting impact on student learning as children who were trained initially in the processes and skills required for successful cooperative learning demonstrated ongoing positive relationships with other students with the ability to help each other and enhance thinking in future cooperative learning experiences [41]. The trusting relationships that are built through cooperative strategies in classrooms will develop collaborative skills that are crucial for the development of both the children's emotional, as well as academic development' [63]. Cooperative learning also helps to promote socialization and learning among students [42]. Additionally, cooperative learning can improve social problems [64], alleviate bullying [65] and help students manage conflict [66]). These all relate to better relationships between students in the classroom. Research [49,59,67] has found that when using cooperative learning students demonstrated the ability to provide explanations, instructions and develop implicit understanding of the needs of other group members which have developed positive relationships. Furthermore, research by Gillies and Ashman [68–70] found that students in structured groups exhibited more cooperative behaviors than other students, giving more unsolicited explanations, tuning in to their group members and offering help without it being requested. This also positively affects achievement [71]. These all relate to the better engagement of students, both cognitively and behaviorally.

3. Methodology

(1) Subjects of the Study and Setting

This paper focusses on classroom observations made in four Swedish classrooms in three different schools in late 2019 in Uppsala, Dallarna and Orebro. A Swedish teacher-researcher assisted me in locating schools which were interested in using cooperative learning and the schools were chosen as they were situated in areas which had increased populations of diverse students, including newly arrived or refugee students. Five teachers in the study consented and were selected as all regularly utilized cooperative learning strategies in their classrooms.

(2) Data Collection and Research Instruments

As argued by Quennerstedt [72], "Observational research is time consuming and therefore restricts the number of observation sites, but fruitful in allowing close-up examinations of how teachers and pupils talk and act in practice" (p. 612). This is further argued by [73], who also advocates for more research on 'teachers' integration of CL into day-to-day school practice' (p. 3). Baines et al. [74] concur that there is also a need to research how teachers implement cooperative learning in their own teaching practice.

I spent a day at each of the three schools. At least one classroom observation (between 30 min and an hour for each) was made with some teachers consenting to two observations. Only students and their parents who had given consent were observed (teachers organized the classroom so that I could focus on certain groupings and students working or organized the class so that only the consenting students were present). Follow up semi-structured interviews with the teachers were also conducted and recorded that day or the following day about their use of cooperative learning pedagogies. I used an observation proforma to look for aspects of democracy classrooms, but due to the language issues of me not understanding the Swedish teachers' and students' conversations, I wrote field notes and watched closely for signs that the spaces were welcoming and caring, the students felt secure and able to learn, and noted which pedagogies the teacher used to determine how they were inclusive, particularly focusing on cooperative learning. I examined the teachers' use of cooperative learning and asked them to define cooperative learning. During the semi-structured interviews that followed the classroom observations, I was able to follow up on what was observed and question further about their use of cooperative learning to determine the choices the teachers made and find out more about

what was occurring. This was necessary due to the language barrier of the classes being taught in Swedish and myself being an English-speaking researcher.

(3)　Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed and fieldnotes were written soon after the observation. These were read and analysed in order to classify the written and oral statements into categories of similar meaning [75]. After a number of iterations, I went back to the literature and examined the data using this lens, particularly focussing on Stembridge's themes of culturally responsive education for equity [47] situated in the data. This provided a theoretical framework and I embarked upon thematic analysis following the principles of coding, identifying open coding of the comments made by teachers during the interviews and fieldnotes recorded during classroom observations. Using Nvivo, I identified the links between the comments raised by the teachers, who had discussed their use of cooperative learning, or aspects of cooperative learning sighted in lessons (i.e., topic or axial coding), to propose higher order conceptualisation of the main themes related to the sub-themes of Stembridge's themes of *Engagement and Relationships* as concepts that are used to bridge equity and pedagogy alongside the literature on cooperative learning. I particularly noticed during the analysis process that many comments focused on the *Engagement* of students and the *Relationships* developed between teacher and students and among students, and therefore used ideas from Stembridge to analyze these encounters. Cooperative learning use occurs in classrooms with teachers who care about relationships [32]. During cooperative learning, when students learn together in small groups, teachers develop the relationships in that classroom and create a particular environment, or climate [35]. Engagement is important when working in cooperative learning groups for the learning to be successful, and social skills are necessary for students to be able to work successfully together [57–62] and remain engaged. Teachers who support their students by highlighting and teaching small group and interpersonal skills are assisting their students to remain engaged in learning activities.

(4)　Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were made by applying and gaining consent through my University Ethics committee; seeking advice from Swedish researchers as well as reading about Swedish ethics requirements [76] to ensure the guidelines matched good research practice in Australia. After consenting to my visit, Principals sought voluntary permission from teachers and teachers sought consent from parents and students. Schools translated information statements and consent forms for parents and students so that informed consent could be given. Good research practice was followed by seeking written informed consent from all participants, providing information about the study, and ensuring results were reported confidentially.

3.1. The Schools and Teacher Participants

3.1.1. School 1

The first school is a large public school in the northern part of a University city in the south of Sweden, west of Stockholm. Among the residents of the city are immigrants from around 165 different countries. The school focus is on life skills, which for them is about how to create a positive group climate through regular social and emotional training. In the school itself there are 597 pupils, which the Principal tells me has doubled in the past 5 years due to the number of new arrivals in the area. There are 47 pupils from ethnic minorities in the schools and 12% of students with another language as their first language, and a total of 27 different languages other than Swedish spoken at the school.

In Sofia's Year 4 class of 25 students (24 present that day) there are only three students with diverse backgrounds, from Syria, Iran and England. All the other students are born in Sweden, although many have parents who were born in other countries and moved to Sweden.

3.1.2. School 2

The second school is in a small multicultural town of about 50,000 in the province of Dalarna, approximately 200 km south of Sweden and is a F-6 school with approximately 200 students. Currently, the major language groups in the town include Somali, Thai, Arabic and Kurmanji, Persian, Turkish, Albanian and Tigrinya. It is a rural school set close to meadows and forests and has an Equal Treatment Plan demonstrating its commitment to social justice and it also describes itself as a school characterized by care, with a strong emphasis on developing active and responsible citizens.

The two teachers (Elsa and Klara) I observed team-teach a Year 3 class of 34 students who are aged 9 and 10. They work between two classrooms, sometimes working as a whole class and other times splitting into two smaller units. They are both experienced teachers but are new to the pedagogy of cooperative learning. They are starting out and are hoping their Principal will let them attend a course after my visit.

3.1.3. School 3

The third school is located in one of the four largest cities in Sweden and is located about 70 km north of Stockholm. The school has approximately 450 pupils. The city this school resides in has a 21 per cent population of the population born in foreign countries. Parents of the students in the school are not all first-generation Swedish residents. Some come from Spanish, German, Arabic, English, and Dutch backgrounds, so some students have mother tongue language studies that are arranged from the local authority. This school is in a village of about 2500 people.

In Jocelyn's year 1 class (ages 6 and 7) of 20 students, there are no students born outside of Sweden, and this is typical of other classes in the school despite the rise in immigration and hence now having a more ethnically, religious and linguistically diverse population in the area.

In Peta's year 4 class (ages 9 and 10) of 22 students, there is one student whose parents came from Iran and all other students are born in Sweden from Swedish-born parents.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Narratives from the Classrooms

4.1.1. School 1: Sofia

I observed Sofia teach a year 4 Geography (social studies lesson) one Friday morning at 10 a.m.

Sofia told me these are new working groups from Monday. They have had the opportunity this week to make a group name and next week they will add a group slogan to their group poster. These are displayed in the room to give the students a sense of group identity.

(Karusellen) Carousel strategy (or Floorstorming) is the cooperative learning activity Sofia is using in today's lesson. Sofia told me that they have been learning about particular terms and their definitions in Geography like 'Map', 'Geography', 'Sweden', 'Natural landscape', Cultural landscape'. Each group member was given a role with a role card (these were Organiser, Secretary, Reporter, Encourager). The role cards had descriptions of the role and how to fulfil it on the back as a reminder. Sofia told me this was the first time she had given them the card but they were familiar with using roles. (She hoped it would help me if I could see who had each role).

They were given a piece of paper per group and one pen per group and were asked to work together to come up with ideas as to what the word meant to them. I watched the secretary write but others made suggestions as to what they could write. After a given amount of time they rotated clockwise to the next table and piece of paper. After 30 min all students were still engaged and were huddled together. After 40 min this was still the case and the class were asked for some reflection.

Calmly Sofia asked them to discuss together the following questions:

How did I cooperate in the group?
Did I do my thing?

Did everyone get a turn to talk and did my friends listen to me?

Can the group now better talk and describe the definitions they have been working with about Geography?

She asked for a brief report back about the content of the task and these questions from the Reporter role.

Each Reporter gave some answers to the questions but often they answered to 'how did you work cooperatively?' simply with 'good'. In one group however they reflected that as the role cards were a novelty (the first use of them) they often just thought about this and forgot the other important aspect of talking and listening to others (in other words the task itself!).

4.1.2. School 2: Elsa and Klara (Class Share)

I observed Elsa teach a Maths class to 14 students at 10 a.m. on a Thursday morning. Half of the class are in a music lesson and will do this same lesson later.

An overview of the lesson has been written on the board and their names are called out to put them into groups of 4 and 5. Elsa had decided to ensure there was a strong maths student and a weaker maths student in each pairing to ensure heterogeneous groupings.

A question (a maths word story problem) is written on the smartboard and they are asked to think about this by themselves. Each child is given a piece of paper and asked to think and write by themselves, then work in their pairs and talk to decide on an answer. They work quietly sharing ideas about how to solve the problem in pairs and then in fours.

Later on in the morning I see the other half of this class having a quiet reading lesson taught by Klara. They are asked to read a chosen book alone and then move into reading with a partner when they are ready (and they can see another child is ready to find a partner). This works seamlessly with different students accepting the offer to read and all being accepted in an inclusive way. The class reads and shares quietly in a sustained way for another 30 min. At times Klara suggests a text to a student (if she feels they may not be challenging themselves in this independent reading lesson) but other times she lets them have the freedom to choose and relax and read a book they just really want to read.

At the end of the school day the class comes together as a group of 34 students. They do a fun game thinking of how many words they can think of with 'ta' in them. After working for a while, they are asked to find a shoulder partner (this is a partner closest to one of your shoulders—either on the left or right hand side) and share a word in turn. The students are settled, engaged and obviously respectful of their partners.

4.1.3. School 3: Jocelyn

I observed Jocelyn teach Swedish language lesson one Tuesday morning. The students arrive in the classroom just after 8 a.m. and quiet music is playing with the teacher greeting each student as they come in with either a high five or a hug (the students choose this). They seem very settled as they arrive with one more reluctant student (who I was told had just started school). The other students knew each other from previous classes (in preschool).

Jocelyn takes the roll by pointing to pictures of the children, pictures they have drawn of themselves. The music is on to settle and calm the students, the teacher makes time for a personal communication and greeting with each student and the roll taking shows that each student is valued by having their artwork displayed and this is being highlighted as important to the students at the start of each day.

Jocelyn goes over the day, date, and month with the students. They then count how many school days they have been at school and do this will bundles of sticks (developing place value information–groups of ten). The reticent child who did not want to come in class is sitting close to Jocelyn. She doesn't participate and has her head lowered. They then go over the 'y-chart in the classroom. There is one on taking turns and one on classroom voices. Gentle reminders from Jocelyn tell the students about today's focussed social skill on taking turns. What does taking turns 'look like', 'sound like', 'feel like'?

She sets up an activity. They are to go into pairs. They make the groups by finding someone with the same length arm. The activity is a lesson where one child is a detective and the other a secretary. The word detective has to spy on the words selected at the front. They are words they are focussing on at the time—common frequency words. The detective comes back and tells the secretary the word and how to spell it, then they swap roles. I notice different strategies being used to remember the words and how to write them. The pairs then go into groups of 4 and are asked to share their words. They are asked to do their secret handshakes. I notice by this time—the reticent girl has found a partner, she is participating in the group activity and she is smiling when they do the secret handshake.

Later, I observe the same class from 12.55–13.25. They are working on a maths activity with their shoulder partners. Before working they are reminded of the Y-charts in the room and particularly the ones about taking turns and using classroom voices. They are asked to find a partner and then one of them is to go and get the required materials—the one with the eldest father. They collect a small whiteboard, a small eraser and a blank sheet of paper. One member of the group using the counters on the whiteboard to make all the combinations that add up to 4. As they are made the other partner writes it as an algorithm on their blank sheet. Then they swap roles and one student makes a different group on the whiteboard with the counters showing it also with whiteboard marker and the other student writes the algorithm on their paper. They share the whiteboard and the counters but they have their own individual recording sheet for the algorithms. I notice the girl who has been shy earlier in the day working alongside a boy. There are several missing values on the sheet and they need to make them all have something in them before they are finished. They encourage each other to stay on task and to keep going. The lesson finishes with a pack up—each child is responsible to place their work in their own work folder and then find a matching number in the room and say the number in English.

4.1.4. School 3: Peta

Peta's year 4 class is organised into tables of 2 to enable paired work and working in fours. I observe her class in a social science lesson one Tuesday morning at 10 a.m.

They move from quiet reading time just before and one child tries to disrupt the class–he is loud and is finding it hard to participate—he is asked to go to the time out area which is a small area in an enclosed space at the back of a room—like a small room. I ask Peta about him later and she tells me he finds visitors in the classroom difficult and prefers to have time away from it when this happens—she said he was quite stressed and the other students actually cope with him quite well although she does sometimes ensure he works in a three so if he is not coping and leaves the group for time out there are still two students to work together.

All students are working in pairs for this activity. They are given a bundle of definitions of words they are using in social science (some are terms they have used for the past four weeks and some are new terms not introduced before) and sort them into two piles so they half the cards each. On one side the cards have a definition and the other side the word. They look at the word decide if they know it for sure, or not sure, or kind of know what it means.

The student with the card reads the word . . . and talks about what they think it means if they know. They then look at the definition and sort into green (yes, they were correct), amber (kind of correct but not completely) or red (were not correct). Then the next student has a turn and they continue until all cards are sorted. Afterwards they look at the words again that are in amber and red and have another try and re-sort.

They work steadily on this lesson for 30 min and appear engaged throughout—improving their piles in the green section as they go.

The narratives from the classrooms give us a sense of these types of cooperative classrooms which have a certain classroom ambience, or democracy stance [32]. The kinds of practices we can see being used by these teachers demonstrate connection between the teachers and their students as well as among students. As Stembridge [47] argues, 'we are better teachers when we are connected to them' (p. 28). I will explore, through these narratives as well as from comments from the teachers during

their interviews, the themes of Engagement and Relationships in relation to literature on cooperative learning, as these are essential themes for teachers seeking to bridge equity through pedagogy.

Engagement is evident in these classrooms when the teachers employ tools and techniques to engage; for example, when Sofia mentions the importance of developing a good classroom climate and supports her students by highlighting and teaching small group and interpersonal skills which are important in a cooperative learning environment [62,77]

"whole class level climate, climate . . . that's very, very important". (Sofia, Interview)

"That's The first thing . . . when someone speaks, you listen, and you look at that person, look at them, and respect". (Sofia, Interview)

Climate is particularly important for newly arrived students [51].

Behavioral engagement is very apparent in all the classrooms observed and helps to develop that particular safe and secure class climate. There is an obvious intent from the students to follow the class rules. Sofia mentions the importance of helping the students create the rules at the beginning of the year to establish this climate and develop that respect, and asks questions like . . .

"what kind of class do we want? So we can learn best? What should we do because we always have a relationship? Would you say . . . everyone here has a responsibility?" (Sofia, Interview)

Jocelyn mentions too that she is able to develop engagement by using cooperative learning structures that support the specific skills.

"the big thing is to talk about how to work in groups that you need to have. And also, it's important to thank each other, I think, this positivity in the group that feel that you need to belong with someone, and that you're not alone. The social skills [are important]." (Jocelyn, Interview)

During the observation, I notice that this behavioral engagement is apparent in Jocelyn's classroom:
Before working they are reminded of the Y-charts in the room, in particular the ones about taking turns and using classroom voices. Y-charts are charts that are split into three sections like a Y—each section asks students to consider what a particular social or small group skill 'looks like' 'sounds like' or 'feels like'.

This shows the class are used to thinking about and reflecting on the social skills necessary to work cooperatively.

In Elsa and Klara's classroom behavioral engagement is demonstrated by the students as they seamlessly move into reading with a partner when they are ready (and they can see another child is ready to find a partner). Different students accept the offer to read and all are accepted in an inclusive way. The class reads and shares quietly in a sustained way for 30 min. The teachers also talk about this behavioral engagement in their joint interview and how there is a need for modelling by the teacher,

"We model our behaviour. We reflect on what's happened and ask how do we carry on? And we say 'stop' if it's just bad behaviour . . . if they have had bad behaviour to each other, we have done a lot of talking with them, they talk to each other and tell how they feel and [how they should] act towards each other. And now we try to let them solve problems. 'Okay, go in there and talk about it". (Elsa and Klara, Interview)

Not only is teacher modelling of caring occurring in these classrooms [44,45] they are also learning how to help their students successfully manage conflict [66]. Students also learn to appreciate the skills of others and become positively connected in their learning tasks, in turn becoming more tolerant of students that they work with [42,43]). This type of acceptance and equity is fundamental to an intercultural classroom.

Affective engagement was demonstrated in Sofia's classroom when I observed that after 30 min into the lesson all students were still engaged and were huddled together; also, no one was excluded.

This affective engagement was also demonstrated by the shy girl in Jocelyn's class who, although new to the school and reticent that morning to engage, demonstrated that feeling of belonging to her class community in a very short time. She found a partner, she participated in the group activity and she was smiling when they did the secret handshake. This is another way Jocelyn developed caring relationships in the class: this type of bonding brings them closer together in order to develop that democratic culture [78] where they are able to make choices about the secret handshake together and where they become like a community of many voices and ears together [33]. This community has allowed her to be included—there were not opportunities for her to be excluded as there would if she was asked to find a friend to work with. In this environment, she found someone like everyone else did.

Active learning was apparent in Elsa and Klara's classroom during the maths lesson involving small group learning. A question (a maths word story problem) was written on the smartboard and they were asked to think about this by themselves. Each child was given a piece of paper and asked to think and write by themselves, then work in their pairs and talk to decide on an answer. They worked quietly, sharing ideas about how to solve the problem in pairs and then in fours. There was no disengagement in the task observed and all students are involved in the learning [37]. Affective engagement goes hand in hand with cognitive engagement [47].

Cognitive engagement was also demonstrated by Jocelyn using cooperative learning structures. She had modelled social skills and their importance in how to tackle a task with others in the classroom too when she had her students examine the 'y-chart' in the classroom. Gentle reminders told the students about these social skills, focusing on aspects from the y-chart about what taking turns 'looks like', 'sounds like', or 'feels like'. The students in her class also demonstrated cognitive engagement when they shared the resources (whiteboard and the counters) demonstrating positive interdependence and then completing their own individual recording sheet for the algorithms demonstrating individual accountability.

> *"And then it's important also to have a structure like 'Do we belong together', that we have a structure that you know how to use. And then that they always need something like, if they work together, they always need to, to, they always need each other. No-one can just say, Oh, you can do it all ... I also have to participate. Also, that something that makes them meet each other [work together rather than alone]".* (Jocelyn, Interview)

She was a teacher who had learnt to use cooperative learning structures to support them in learning to work cooperatively. In turn the students are able to tune in to group members as this socialization is improved which also improves learning [42]. Good social and group skills then allow students to have the ability to provide explanations, instructions and develop an implicit understanding of the needs of other group members [49,79].

Cognitive engagement was again observed in Jocelyn's classroom when I observed the word activity lesson where one child was the detective and the other the secretary. The word detective had to spy on the words selected at the front. They were words being focused on at the time—common frequency words. The detective came back to tell the secretary the word and how to spell it, then they swapped roles. I noticed different strategies being used to remember the words and how to write them demonstrating students modelling different strategies to others and heightened engagement through the use of cooperative learning [52–55]. The pairs then moved into groups of four and were asked to share their words. They worked in a sustained way doing this, swapping roles and keeping each other on task. The use of different roles for individual accountability supported this cognitive engagement.

Cognitive engagement was evident in Jocelyn's classroom, with different students reminding others to stay on task, encouraging each other to keep going (both affective and behavioral engagement), but ultimately showing strategic understanding in how to complete a cooperative learning task (cognitive engagement).

I notice the girl who has been shy earlier in the day working alongside a boy. At one point she says, "This isn't good," about what she has done—and the boy she is working with replies—"Yes it is–let's keep going!". (Jocelyn, observation field notes)

On another table a boy is resting his head on the table looking sleepy—his partner looks at the timer Jocelyn has put on the board and says "quick—you need to fill in your sheet". There are a number of missing values on the sheet and they need to make them all have something in them before they are finished. (Jocelyn, observation field notes)

This gentle encouragement to stay on task and also to keep going was a sign that the pairs were supportive of each other and also enabled them to do a great job of the activity. These practices helped to develop social and emotional learning in the classroom [57,59–61] with positive and respectful relationships [41,71], a sense of belonging and 'relational trust' [80] being an obvious value that was promoted.

Relationships have a huge impact on the way a teacher can manage and develop the students in their classrooms. Research into the benefits of cooperative learning has also identified a number of outcomes including improved social skills and relationships between students. Ongoing positive relationships are developed when teachers take time to develop these skills [41]. Sofia stressed the importance of developing good relationships in her classroom.

"I would say it's about cooperation in our relationships, and about how we learn together. That's what I think, what if you don't learn alone . . . This is so much better. And I think that especially . . . , you learn in a group where you learn from each other". (Sofia, Interview)

She went on:

"The first thing I would say, you need to do when working with the group is to be tight and be I mean, to be safe and . . . to be, you know, accepted to [be able to] say [the] wrong things, instead of being . . . laughing at each other, you need to feel very safe in the group". (Sofia, Interview)

Being safe and accepted in a group is particularly important for diverse students and newly arrived pupils who may be struggling with limited language skills and who are 'learning to be' as these students are often learning to act with greater autonomy in unfamiliar situations [29]. Being safe and included is also important as they learn to work alongside others and to participate and cooperate with others—'learning to live together' [29]. Again, Sofia talked about the safety the students felt in the small group situations when working in CL groups, but she also commented on how she can develop deeper relationships with her students as a result of the Swedish system of having more than one year with the students as their teacher. In this school, the teachers kept the students for three years.

"So you can also see so many different sides of one student, you know, you can see [child's name], she's very shy in that way [in the whole class situation] but when she comes into this group, she's just so safe. I can take a step back. And I can see new sides of my students. And I think that's very, very important. because I also think you have a . . . when you're so many years with your students, you have you have, you know, sometimes you can have a specific idea about the students, you can, you know, is always something new to, to look for". (Sofia, Interview)

She developed these relationships in the classroom through practical activities (poster and slogan making for group identity).

"Student (from Syria) has been here for four weeks, you know. Her mum texted me two days ago, she said, this is the dialogue she told me. 'It's gonna be so fun'. She replied, 'Now, why is the school fun?' She replied 'Because Sofia is giving me so much encouragement, feedback, and tells us that we're going . . . we're doing a good job'. And she [the parent] tells me, so I . . . I didn't know that!" (Sofia, Interview)

Similarly, Jocelyn developed relationships with her students by greeting her students outside the classroom. Immediately I saw this was a classroom with a democracy feel where relationships are prioritized [32].

"I think that you want to see a child and have a relationship with them, know a little bit behind their name know a little bit about the parents, I'm very involved with the parents. They know me very much. Yes, I call them we have SMS text messages. I really work with my parents, and the kids know that, Okay. And I also work of course, with the kids. But this is what you call it. It's, it's a back and forth". (Sofia, Interview)

Elsa and Klara developed the relationships in the classroom over time. They noted that the students "didn't always work like this" and that at times it was difficult to get them working in groups, but that now they are seeing developments in the relationships after the class has worked closely with cooperative learning for the past three years. I noticed in their classroom that they were willing to work with anyone. It didn't matter who worked with who. Elsa and Klara claimed, "it wasn't like that in the beginning" and now they are able to say to their students who may be experiencing issues with each other:

"Now we try to let them solve problems. Okay, go in there and talk about it. Because it can [be necessary] you [the teacher] can't solve this . . . ". (Elsa and Klara, Interview)

As argued by Stembridge [47], ' . . . relationships for them [students who may experience social, economic or educational disadvantage] are the channel through which their investment with school is personalized' (p. 88). It is therefore important to develop acceptance and inclusion in the classroom and through this tolerance, active participation will be further developed [81]. Sofia mentioned she does this:

"If I show them that they are accepted. You know, I'm interested, okay. 'Can you tell me about your culture?' 'What did you do when you were somewhere else?' You know, [give them the chance to talk] . . . And, you know, [some people] don't worry about what we have opinions about, you know, eg [they say] "I don't believe in other people coming to Sweden", because we have many, many, many immigrants coming. So right now it's, it's a very rough world [for some students]". (Sofia, Interview)

Sofia mentioned how she was now a much more student-centered teacher since realizing the importance of developing strong relationships, and she is able to listen to her students so much better now as a result of this.

"That's what I think is the big change for me that I don't need to be the focus. Yeah . . . I can still please just go ahead and I can watch them. Yes, like, so that's a new thing for me. I never used this before. Before this thing [using CL] and I was always listening [now]. I was always standing in the front and talking to them, talking and never giving them the opportunity. I never tried that [before]". (Sofia, Interview)

Positive and respectful relationships and interactions with teachers have been shown to improve both engagement at school and academic motivation [54], with students performing better academically when they experience this sense of belonging at school [82]. As positive and respectful relationships are built, students in these classrooms have a sense of belonging, with many opportunities to talk about values [83] as they build a collaborative community.

Similarly, Gay [46] cites the importance of culturally responsive caring, as caring for students instead of about them. She encourages teachers to go beyond simply feeling concern for students and calls on us to become actively engaged in creating positive outcomes for culturally and linguistically

diverse students. Culturally responsive caring begins with building relationships as an avenue to better understand students [84].

It has also been shown by a number of researchers that when students' teachers are caring and understanding, they become more willing to participate in class due to feelings of safety. The ability to be risk takers when participating in discussions also shows they are more likely to become more involved in society [85–87].

5. Conclusions

These classroom snapshots of learning, and discussions with teachers in a time of increased migration have demonstrated that the themes of Relationships and Engagement [47] are themes that bridge equity and pedagogy. Cooperative learning is one such pedagogy that develops these relationships and encourages an engaging and caring environment. The teachers have managed to develop strong relationships and have succeeded in strong engagement in their rooms: care has been evident in these classrooms. Their 'ethic of care' [45] is evident as they demonstrate how they have encouraged their students to recognise and value themselves. According to Kostoulas-Makrakis and Makrakis [88] 'The most valuable thing we can offer our learners is genuine care, hope, happiness and love' (p.178).The open dialogue between teachers and students and students and students is also evident, as is the practice of care towards each other in the rooms. Classroom climates which demonstrate the teachers know their students and allow them to grow accordingly is also apparent. It is increasingly important that in teacher education we provide 'training to gain awareness of the refugee experience as well as of the cultural backgrounds of refugee learners so that they can be responsive to refugee leaners' needs and be sensitive to trauma reactions' [88].The use of cooperative learning has shown teachers with a commitment to fairness, social responsibility and a concern for others. Now more than ever, our students need education that gives them the skills to understand and respect others as well as to be comfortable with difference [89]. It is important for us to revolutionize classrooms to enable our increasingly diverse student population to thrive. This is particularly vital for students with greater exposure to the elements of social, economic and educational disadvantage. Future research should focus on the importance of culturally responsive pedagogies and their ability to cater for diversity in a way that supports newly arrived students. This small study has its limitations in that it only focusses on one country and a small number of classrooms and teachers. However, the positive results from the study suggests more observational studies of teachers using culturally responsive pedagogies, such as cooperative learning are needed, to ensure our diverse population are catered for and nurtured in classrooms all around the world.

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