

## **Striving for Parity: Classroom Collaboration of University Ethnic Diversity Students in Ecuador**

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**ABSTRACT:** This interdisciplinary study aimed to explore the relationship between university students' participation in community development activities and their collaboration in the classroom. The students concerned form part of an ethnic diversity program in the Ecuadorian capital city, Quito. Findings demonstrate the potential for collaborative assignments to exacerbate conditions of inequality, and the belief that experiences and skills gained during participation in community development are transferable to group learning activities. Finally, like other factors impeding effective collaboration, conditions of inequality highlight the necessity for strategies to manage collaborative learning groups within the classroom.

**KEYWORDS:** Collaborative learning, university students, ethnic diversity, participation, international development

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### **Introduction**

The social aspects of classroom collaboration are often complex and multi-faceted. Despite results of cognitive gains from collaboration, one of the numerous issues to exist during the application of collaborative work is the extent to which diversity of student background affects the performance of groups. This and other issues, including social and environmental factors, present challenges to successful attainment of positive gains from collaboration. In analyzing collaboration through the lens of students with scholarships in a program for disadvantaged students, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of environments that foster and enable good classroom collaboration.

The present study examines the perspectives of and attitudes to classroom collaboration of students from ethnically diverse backgrounds at a private university in Ecuador, a country which officially recognizes the concept of plural nationality for its Indigenous peoples and nations. The students in question are part of a scholarship

program providing education opportunities to vulnerable and underprivileged students. Due both to Ecuador's rich heritage of Indigenous groups, and an extensive scholarship program designed to foster student diversity within the university, this setting offers an excellent opportunity to research the effects of cultural diversity on collaborative practices.

Whereas the scholarship students are from less privileged and often rural backgrounds, the mainstay of the university's student body come to the university from Quito's upper- and middle-class private school system. While presenting challenges in terms of prior education opportunities, the backgrounds of diverse students often provide them with a different perspective on collaboration, that of young people with previous, and sometimes frequent, participation in community development. Acknowledging the parallels between classroom collaboration and participation in development, this study analyzes the potentials and problems relating to the participation of ethnically diverse students in collaborative learning activities. The resulting data emphasize the struggles of diverse students to achieve parity in the classroom and provide insights into how collaboration can help to bridge the gap.

### **Literature Review**

Much research has been conducted to investigate the cognitive potential of classroom collaboration. The positive influence of collaboration perceived by investigators is summed up by Du, Ge and Xu (2015): "It has become widely accepted, in recent years, that students learn more effectively when they collaborate with others" (p. 152). Without achieving consensus, the prevailing opinion is that collaboration in the right activities has a positive cognitive effect on student knowledge and learning (for example, see Nokes-Malach, 2015). The benefits of collaborative writing identified by Limbu and Markauskaite (2015) resonate more broadly, effectively summarizing the potential of classroom collaboration in general: "a) promote deeper learning; b) encourage students' initiative, creativity and critical thinking; and c) help students to work jointly on shared objectives" (p. 393). Nevertheless, empirical evidence relating to the cognitive differences between individual and collaborative learning resulting in tangible assistance in improving the learning experience is lacking (Chen & Chang, 2016, p. 458).

One example of cognitive gains is provided by social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasizes the contribution made by social interactions in knowledge construction. Similarly, critical and inclusive pedagogies (CIPs) base themselves around dialogue in collaborative spaces, enabling the analysis and appreciation of differing perspectives and the co-construction of knowledge (Gaitanidis & Shao-Kobayashi, 2016). Using CIPs, groups build collective cognitive representations resulting from the interplay between individual knowledge and the cognitive knowledge structures created by group interaction (Curşeu & Sari, 2015).

Those cognitive gains are often partnered with numerous challenges, which Malmberg et al. (2015) place in the following categories: cognitive, motivational, social and environmental (p. 563). Malmberg et al.'s analysis of prior research shows these challenges often result from failures to understand and work well with others. Although negative forms of collaboration such as relationship conflict and social loafing have been identified (Curşeu & Pluut, 2013), the degree to which the formation and performance of

groups must be managed by teachers is often underestimated. De Hei et al.'s (2015) review of early literature highlights a consistent belief that lecturers lack either the experience or the ability to successfully manage group composition and cohesion. Indeed, these authors' own study of lecturer beliefs evidenced a number of issues with the execution of collaborative learning, including a lack of value placed on the collaborative learning process by students. A recent study of students' and teachers' perceptions identified four obstacles to collaborative learning: students' lack of collaborative skills, free-riding (loafing), competence status, and friendship (Le, 2018). All of these obstacles indicate the need for effective management of collaborative learning by teachers and professors.

In addition to the negative ways in which people contribute to group work, students can also experience adverse learning outcomes. Collaborative inhibition occurs when the individual's performance is worse in a collaborative group than it would be if they were working alone (Nokes-Malach et al., 2015). The phenomenon of collaborative inhibition raises a concern over the ethical correctness of imposing collaborative work on unwilling students, and further highlights the need to understand and plan more exhaustively for classroom collaboration.

Diversity of student background, while providing complexity to the co-construction of knowledge, can heighten the need to manage collaboration more effectively. Curşeu's and Plutt's (2013) study found that, while diversity of gender and nationality have a positive effect on the cognitive complexity of groups, the same diversity also produces a negative effect in terms of teamwork. These authors advocate the need to manage diverse groups in a number of ways, including teamwork training, the use of norms, and the structuring of collaboration using role assignment and individual accountability. Slavin (2014) advocates a similar strategy, with group goals and individual accountability complemented by communication and problem-solving skills such as active listening and encouraging teammates.

### **Collaborative Groups and Diversity**

Previous research highlights the positive effect of group diversity on such factors as cognitive complexity and group satisfaction. Curşeu and Sari (2015) investigated how gender variety moderates the impact of power diversity on group cognitive complexity and group satisfaction in a sample of 478 Dutch university students. Their results revealed that groups with large power disparities reached a high level of cognitive complexity and group satisfaction only when they had mixed gender diversity. In gender homogeneous groups there was a negative relationship between these factors.

In some situations, the cognitive complexity gains to be found in diverse groups can be attributed to prior knowledge brought to subject matter learning by students from diverse backgrounds (Bolitzer et al., 2016). In such scenarios, dissonance between differing perspectives can enrich cognitive learning and provides the basis for the use of critical pedagogies. As Martinez et al. (2016) argue, in contexts where great diversity exists, the alternative to critical and inclusive pedagogies are those which dehumanize by failing to address the historical marginalization of people within inequitable education systems (p. 146). Tuitt (2016) further emphasizes this point:

To create inclusive, affirming, and equitable learning environments for *all* students, but especially racially minoritized students, educators must reject the temptation to revert back to traditional pedagogical practices and at the same time confront dominant ideologies and conceptualize a pedagogy of hope. (p. 218, italics in original)

Thus, the remedy for dehumanizing pedagogies is to achieve the cultural synthesis identified by Freire (1970) within the context of critical pedagogies that value diversity and conscientization. While diversity in cultural background has the potential for cognitive gains for whole groups because students benefit from each other's diverse perspectives, it also informs numerous other aspects of learning including motivation, communication, and learning styles, all of which affect students' participation and performance during collaborative activities (Economides, 2008). Thus, cultural background can further complicate the already nuanced practice of collaborative learning.

Du et al. (2015) investigated issues pertaining to the participation of ethnic minorities in collaborative learning. They interviewed nine African American females studying in an online environment. Among the learning trends identified by the interview process were preferences for working in racially mixed groups and assuming group leadership. At university level, empirical evidence has shown that collaborative learning influences the openness of first year college students to diversity as a result of more frequent interactions with others from different backgrounds (Loes et al., 2018). The current study focuses on the linkages between ethnically diverse students' participation in community development and their collaboration in university classes.

In Ecuador, Indigenous knowledge and perspectives on collaboration and participation are embodied by the concept of *Buen Vivir*. Enshrined in Ecuador's 2008 Constitution, *Buen Vivir* is the Spanish term for *Sumak Kawsay*, the Indigenous 'cosmovision' that stresses the need for harmonic relations between human beings and Mother Nature. The most effective translation of *Buen Vivir* to English is "Good Living," although this translation belies the complexity of the concept. Indigenous reciprocal and solidary customs are at the heart of *Buen Vivir/Sumak Kawsay* (Acosta, 2012). These practices are numerous but include *mingas*, communal work days for performing activities benefitting the community, and *ranti-ranti*, an exchange of work on a "*first you and then me*" basis over an indeterminate period of time. According to Indigenous tradition, solidarity and reciprocity are therefore part of everyday life. By contrast, both collaboration and participation are often temporary undertakings, although the latter has many forms.

### **An Interdisciplinary Perspective: Correlating Classroom Collaboration with Participation in International Development**

Parallels between participation in community development and collaborative learning are apparent at a number of levels; the most basic of which concerns difficulties with definition. The term participation serves to describe a wide array of development and activities, so much so that Oakley (1991) remarks that it is impossible to write anything that has a universal meaning to all the forms and methods of participation (p. 23). Similarly, Gujit and Shah (eds. 1998, p. 9) assert that participation is often "ill-defined and meaningless."

This critique bears a close resemblance to Harris's (1992) assessment of the use of the term collaboration in education: "the term [collaboration] is also used as a blanket tossed over a variety of activities that are not identical, thereby blurring useful distinctions" (p. 369). As such, definitions of collaborative learning are often very inclusive, for example, "Collaborative learning refers to methods whereby students are encouraged or required to work together on learning tasks" (De Hei et al., 2015, p. 233). Within this definition, we can collocate the four types of collaborative activities described by Limbu and Markauskaite (2015): a way of dividing work between participants, a means of pooling expertise to create an end product, a fusion of ideas for deeper understanding of content, and a way to develop new skills and attributes (p. 393).

Definitions of collaborative and cooperative learning focus on different factors. For instance, Loes et al. (2018) note that, while cooperative learning is typical of secondary school education, collaborative learning is more commonly associated with college education. I follow Hod and Ben-Zvi's (2015, p. 579) definition of the simple division of tasks as cooperative learning, an activity lying along a continuum towards collaborative learning. When the division of tasks occurs with little interaction or group work, it represents a fairly primitive form of collaboration. Moreover, were we to define collaborative learning as a critical and inclusive pedagogy, with aspirations of achieving Freire's (1970) liberating education of conscientization, or achieving critical consciousness through dialogue, we might well accept "a fusion of ideas for deeper understanding of context" as the only true collaborative activity. Since collaborative learning (CL) need not necessarily be employed as a critical and inclusive pedagogy, we can but concur with Harris's blanket tossed over numerous activities.

Indeed, Hod's and Ben-Zvi's continuum of collaboration types is indicative of another confluence between CL and participation in development. Mikkelsen (2005) provides a typology of people's participation in development which orders participatory activities on a scale starting with the simplest form of "passive participation" and culminating with "self-mobilization." In between these two poles are numerous forms of participation: participation in information giving, participation by consultation, participation for material incentives, functional participation, and interactive participation. While "passive participation" could also be described as non-participation, other forms of participation early in the spectrum are also rudimentary. However, by the time the spectrum reaches "interactive participation," when groups form for analysis and decision-making, and the initiation of change through "self-mobilization," participants are taking control of development initiatives with a need for only minimal assistance from outside.

The parallel between collaborative learning and participation in development then is the range of forms that people's social contributions assume, with more cursory activities leading to those that constitute a fuller experience with associated benefits. Just as self-mobilization is more likely to engage participants in real change, a critical "fusion of ideas for deeper understanding" (Markauskaite, 2015, p. 393) promises a self-consciousness far removed from the mere division of tasks in cooperative learning.

Since both participation in development theory and collaborative learning have roots in Freirean pedagogy, these parallels are not surprising. Methodologies for people's participation in the diagnostics, planning, and evaluation of development interventions,

such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), attempt to promote local knowledge and realities. PRA is a “menu” of tools and techniques including mapping, rating, and storytelling, all of which can be performed with low technology such as stones, sticks and earth. During such participatory processes, external facilitators “hand over the stick” to local people as they relinquish control and seek to empower local realities (Chambers, 1997, p. 191). Similarly, Freirean pedagogy provides a theoretical basis for conceptualizing collaborative work (Stewart & McClure, 2013).

Thus, power relationships reflect the political nature of both collaborative groups and participation. The role of the teacher or professor is key to the successful implementation of collaborative learning, as is that of facilitator to community participatory development. The power held by community participation facilitators, resulting in the importance of their “complicity and desire” to the success of participatory activities, has led them to be likened to evangelical priests (Kapoor, 2005, p. 1207). By comparison, Roskelly (1994) argues that the spirit of collaborative learning is curtailed by those teachers who act as a “willing or unwilling servant,” imposing house rules and foregone conclusions (p. 144).

The connections between participation and collaboration outlined above particularly resonate in countries such as Ecuador, where community participation is prevalent, especially in rural areas. The current research seeks to investigate the following questions:

- What are ethnically diverse students’ experiences with classroom collaboration?
- How do community participation and classroom collaboration compare and contrast from the perspective of students with experience in both?

By answering these questions, this study aims to contribute to knowledge of the strategies professors and teachers can use to facilitate effective collaboration in the classroom. This includes the conditions for collaborative work and how activities are organized, with special consideration given to the inclusion of disadvantaged students.

## **Method**

### **Context**

Research was conducted at a private Ecuadorian university in the capital city, Quito. Of the university’s student population of around 8,400, a total of 649 were categorized as ethnically diverse students, with 26 different ethnicities represented in the student body. As one of the highest-fee-paying universities in the country, a large proportion of the rest of the student body is composed of students from Ecuador’s middle and upper classes. Table 1 shows the classification of the students enrolled in the ethnic diversity program and demonstrates the rich social fabric of peoples pre-dating the colonial settlement of the region. The categories used by the university do not necessarily correlate with the official list of peoples and nations. For example, “Mestizo,” “Galápagos,” and “Refugee” are not in themselves recognized nations, but rather categories employed by the university.

**Table 1***The Ecuadorian Ethnic Groups Enrolled at the University*

|                  |           |          |
|------------------|-----------|----------|
| Otavalo          | Shuar     | Chibuleo |
| Mestizo          | Salasaca  | Cañari   |
| Afro-Ecuadorian  | Montubio  | Secoya   |
| Amazonian Kichwa | Kañari    | Tsachila |
| Purumá           | Galápagos | Siona    |
| Panzaleo         | Pasto     | Cofán    |
| Cayambi          | Karanki   | Chachi   |
| Kitu Kara        | Waranka   | Refugee  |
| Saraguro         | Huaorani  |          |

Like so many Latin American nations, Ecuador has a long history of marginalization dating back to its colonial history. Following gains achieved by years of struggle by the country's Indigenous movement, Ecuador's 2008 Constitution, which resulted from a constituent assembly, recognized the concept of plural nationality. The new constitution recognizes Ecuador's ethnic races both as citizens of the Ecuadorian state, and as autonomous nationals with protected status. The diversity of ethnicities in Ecuador results, in part, from the country's geographic diversity, with the four distinct regions of Andean highlands, Amazon rainforest, Pacific coast and the Galapagos islands. There are eighteen peoples and fourteen Indigenous nationalities in Ecuador. Whereas nationality refers to ethnic origin, the peoples are collectives from geographic centers with unique cultural identity.

**Procedure and Survey Data**

An initial survey emailed to every Program of Ethnic Diversity (*Programa de Diversidad Étnica*, PDE) student at the university was followed by semi-structured interviews with students selected on the basis of their survey responses. From 649 recipients, the survey received a total of 166 replies, constituting a response rate of 25.6%. Respondents were asked about their learning preferences in relation to performing and being evaluated for individual and group work, their perceptions on the benefits of collaboration, and their experiences with local community participatory development work. Evaluation of responses was statistical and relational.

**Interviews**

In addition to the Program of Ethnic Diversity Coordinator, twenty-five undergraduate students attended interviews. As the research questions relate to the parallels between classroom collaboration and participatory community development work, students were invited for interview based on their answers to the survey question, "How often have you participated in community development activities and/or projects?" Almost 76% of respondents had previously participated in community development activities, of which 19.3% (32) had done so with a high frequency. The data for this question is displayed in Appendix B. These last students were identified for interview. All of the interviews were conducted in the Spanish language: The English translations

provided are the author's own and are as literal as possible in order to retain integrity, and do not attempt refinements for the sake of creating more natural or pleasing discourse in the English language. The interview protocol is displayed in Appendix A.

### Interview Participants

As Table 1 shows, within the group of students interviewed, there was a significant variety in gender diversity, subject of study, and university experience. Similarly, the participants were drawn from a breadth of geographical and ethnic backgrounds.

**Table 2**

*Interviewee Attributes*

| <b>Interviewee</b> | <b>Mr. /Ms.</b> | <b>Degree/Major</b>          | <b>Semester of study</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>1</b>           | Ms.             | Electronic engineering       | 9                        |
| <b>2</b>           | Mr.             | Electronic engineering       | 8                        |
| <b>3</b>           | Mr.             | Biology                      | 2                        |
| <b>4</b>           | Ms.             | Psychology                   | 5                        |
| <b>5</b>           | Mr.             | Law                          | 5                        |
| <b>6</b>           | Ms.             | Industrial engineering       | 8                        |
| <b>7</b>           | Ms.             | Environmental engineering    | 6                        |
| <b>8</b>           | Mr.             | International relations      | 7                        |
| <b>9</b>           | Ms.             | International relations      | 7                        |
| <b>10</b>          | Mr.             | Environmental engineering    | 8                        |
| <b>11</b>          | Ms.             | Veterinary science           | 4                        |
| <b>12</b>          | Mr.             | Mechanical engineering       | 3                        |
| <b>13</b>          | Ms.             | International relations      | 3                        |
| <b>14</b>          | Ms.             | Industrial engineering       | 5                        |
| <b>15</b>          | Ms.             | Culinary arts                | 7                        |
| <b>16</b>          | Ms.             | Industrial engineering       | 4                        |
| <b>17</b>          | Ms.             | Psychology                   | 5                        |
| <b>18</b>          | Ms.             | International relations      | 10                       |
| <b>19</b>          | Mr.             | Educational science          | 7                        |
| <b>20</b>          | Ms.             | Anthropology                 | 2                        |
| <b>21</b>          | Mr.             | Digital animation            | 4                        |
| <b>22</b>          | Ms.             | Psychology                   | 4                        |
| <b>23</b>          | Ms.             | Law                          | 5                        |
| <b>24</b>          | Ms.             | Biotechnological engineering | 6                        |
| <b>25</b>          | Ms.             | Civil engineering            | 3                        |
| <b>26</b>          | N/A             | PDE Program Coordinator      | N/A                      |

## **Qualitative Research Considerations**

As this investigation is a qualitative research process focused on the participation of subjects from Indigenous and disadvantaged backgrounds, there are a number of ethical considerations to address. The position of the researcher and participants/subjects as insiders/outside to ethnological research is one such issue (Savvides et al., 2014). Another is the author's identity in relation to the subjects of the study, explicitly expressed in the spirit of "radical honesty" (Williams, 2016, p. 71).

The author is a White European male lecturer at the university of study. None of the interviewees had taken a course with the investigator prior to the interview process. In terms of position and power, their enrollment in the Program of Ethnic Diversity confirms that the subjects come from affirmative action categories. Moreover, due to their status as undergraduate students, the subjects experience a power differential in comparison with the investigator. Finally, as members of Indigenous communities, participants in this study come from vulnerable groups in society.

The author has an external position to the Indigenous groups and communities of which the research participants are members. As the interviews took place on campus, the subjects themselves were also in a physical location external to their communities. While the researcher's external position has benefits in terms of objectivity, the outsider faces challenges relating to the depth of understanding of cultural issues (Savvides et al., 2014). As discussed in the findings section, Spanish is often a second language for the study's participants and is one element of prior education in which there can be a discrepancy between the subjects of study and their mestizo counterparts. However, the university's entrance examinations test Spanish proficiency, and, for this reason, language was not considered to be an inhibiting factor for the study participants.

## **Data Analysis**

The 26 interviews detailed above were conducted in Spanish, recorded, and transcribed verbatim to facilitate the subsequent analysis of discourse, including exact use of language by interviewees. Although verbatim transcription has limits in relation to multilingual research (Loubere, 2017), the shared use of the Spanish language in this context facilitated the capture of what was sometimes emotional and expressive language. Analysis of transcriptions according to trends, keywords, and thematic categories followed transcription.

## **Results**

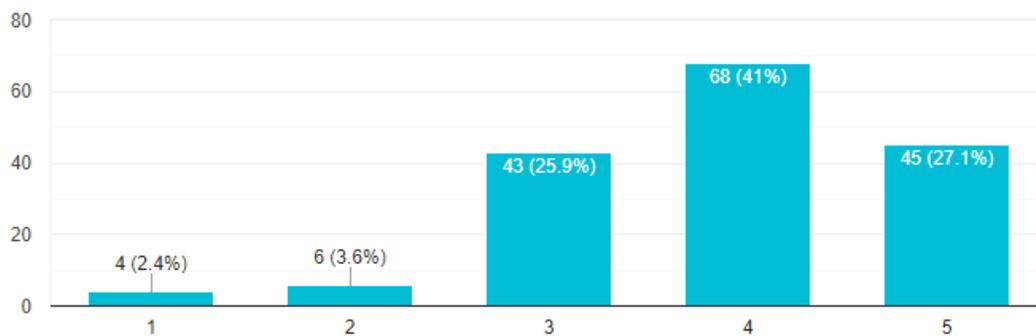
The survey results evidence the perception that collaborative and cooperative work in groups and pairs is beneficial for improving individual abilities. Only 5 (3%) students believed that such group work does nothing to improve those abilities, whereas the other 97% perceived benefits to personal abilities either in some situations (119, 71.7%) or in all collaborative activities (42, 25.3%). Appendix B displays a bar chart for the results pertaining to this question. In terms of knowledge improvement, the results also showed a positive attitude from survey respondents. On a Likert scale of 1-5, where 1 indicates "not at all" and 5 indicates "significantly," students were asked whether they felt that

collaborative work improved their subject knowledge. As Figure 1 shows, the results were heavily weighted towards the higher end of the scale. The average weighting was over 3.8.

### Figure 1

*Responses to the survey question “Do you believe group work improves your knowledge of a subject?” (1= not at all, 5 = a lot)*

166 responses



### Diversity and Tension

The Program of Ethnic Diversity began when one biologist working in the Ecuadorian Amazon was able to arrange some scholarships for young Indigenous people in the area. Years later, the program has grown to the extent that its name is something of a misnomer (and only remains due to a desire for continuity). According to the PDE program coordinator (Interviewee 26), the program now welcomes students with the following characteristics: participants must “come from one of the affirmative action categories: vulnerability, ethnic minority, difficult economic situations, and now we have disabled [people] and refugees.”

Candidates must also demonstrate academic ability when taking university entrance exams. Upon acceptance into the university and diversity program, the struggle for parity is just beginning. At a fundamental level, many of the interviewed students come from communities where Spanish is not the traditional language. Moreover, the institution in question is a liberal arts university and has a general college of compulsory subjects including English, Mathematics, Writing, and Rhetoric, and subjects from the Social Sciences. The requirement to take English as a Second Language (ESL) classes is the clearest indicator that the program’s students must compensate for the limitations of their previous education. Counterparts arriving from some of the best schools in Quito regularly test into the higher levels of the ESL program or perform so well on the placement test that they need not take any levels of ESL at all. In contrast, Interviewee 10 discusses a common problem of PDE students, “I do not have a good base in English because I come from the province of Esmeraldas, and there it is not good [the English education available]. Some schools don’t teach any English at all.” This lack of preparedness is not

restricted to English. The PDE program coordinator explained that, "The same challenge that happens with English occurs with the sciences, and likewise it is very common with mathematics... academic writing, everything that is composition and expression, as well as applied mathematics and calculus."

Scholarships for ethnically diverse students do not include living allowances, meaning recipients must also cope with economic disparities. An extreme case is that of one interviewee (18) who must commute from the city of Cotacachi, some three hours away by bus. Other interviewees conveyed, often emotively, the tensions felt by PDE students. For example, Interviewee 8 said,

I live in a very poor place and I dress very badly compared with them. Should I work in a team with a person who passes by me when we are in ethnic diversity week and says "the guys from ethnic diversity are good for nothing scroungers"? Should I work with them? To them, I'm someone who has arrived here to steal their budget.

The paradox, according to this interviewee, is that, due to their studies, PDE students can be well respected and admired in their own communities, while simultaneously experiencing problems of acceptance on campus.

I go to the community... I arrive and they pluck a chicken [in honor of my arrival]. But here [on campus] I arrive with strange pants, a strange shirt, having slept poorly. I look at my classmates and I'm not at their level.

Working on cooperative/collaborative group assignments outside the classroom can exacerbate this situation of financial inequality. On the occasions when students choose to meet in person, they often go to expensive eateries or to each other's houses. Few diversity students have sufficient funds to go to such restaurants or have accommodation with enough space to entertain their fellow students.

The integration of diversity students is also hindered by feelings of inferiority or shame. Such feelings were expressed by a number of interviewees. However, as described by the diversity program coordinator, integration often fails to materialize not just between diversity students and the rest of the student body, but even between the different ethnic groups within the diversity program.

### **Collaborative and Cooperative Learning**

A total of eleven interviewees discussed their feelings towards group work in general. Complementing the results of the survey, the overwhelming response was a feeling of positivity about group collaboration. The potential benefits described include experience in teamwork and the support role that fellow students can play in the learning process. One voice of dissent comes from Interviewee 13, who said, "I don't like to work in groups because, generally, I don't like to socialize that much, or at times there are a lot of people who don't work and the rest have to do their work."

When professors assign group projects with work to be completed outside the classroom, in the majority of cases this leads to a task division cooperative learning experience rather than a collaborative one. Thirteen students specifically detailed how such assignments are divided into sections to be completed individually, with

communication taking place via a social messaging application. In contrast, just one student detailed a process in which students met in person to perform project work together. The limitations of such an approach are ably described by Interviewee 18,

[When] your colleagues send you to do a subtopic, you are going to focus only on your subtopic... you prepare yourself on what you have to do and you don't know anything about what your colleagues are doing and there won't be any harmony over the central topic. Whereas, if you collaborate on the work as a whole, you are going to know about the general topic and not just the part which is your responsibility.

On many occasions, the reasons for dividing up work are pragmatic: students with different timetables and busy lives have little opportunity to meet outside class. Nevertheless, some students fail to appreciate the cognitive gains to be made by engaging in collaborative rather than cooperative learning. Some students shun collaboration from a confidence that the depth of their own knowledge and understanding of the subject is greater than that of their peers. Interviewee 17 describes this situation, saying, "In groups there are people who don't care or who already know [about the subject] or who are a lot more advanced and they don't care about sharing their ideas."

Further, this interviewee suggests that a willful insistence in one's own abilities makes some people poor candidates for transformative collaborative learning experiences:

I believe the fact of having an experience... an enriching one like collaboration can be - it could change people. On the other hand, others impose their ideas because during their whole lives they have done what they have wanted, and nothing has happened and no one has opposed them.

This interviewee identifies not only the cognitive potential of collaboration, but also issues surrounding preparedness of students to collaborate well. Such issues include personality types and a lack of appreciation of the benefits of collaborative work.

### **Responses to Social Loafing**

Despite the positive reaction to group work and collaboration, problems exist. For example, interviewees lament the tendency of many students to procrastinate, leading to group projects being left to the last minute. Nine students discussed the effects of social loafing, with evidence suggesting the phenomenon is fairly common. While interviewees mention various responses to loafing, the general consensus reveals students as being reluctant to inform the professor for fear of giving a bad impression of the group as a whole. This may be a result of professors failing to take action when they are informed. As Interviewee 9 explained, "[B]ut the professor does nothing, and the person [the loafer] keeps their grade. I had a bad experience of this last semester." The professor's reaction to the complaint of loafing, according to Interviewee 9, was, "You are adults now, sort yourselves out."

When addressing the issue with the culprit fails to correct behavior, most students feel the only alternative is to accept the added burden of doing the loafer's share of the work. Six interviewees had previous experience of such a response. Interviewee 3 was

alone in offering an alternative solution to loafing, saying, "If the person did not help, when names are written on the group work sheet, I don't add their name because they haven't collaborated." This measure was an action taken at the end of the collaborative learning process to reflect a less than optimal outcome. Steps and procedures for earlier corrective action may prevent the need for such punitive decisions from arising.

### **Participation in Community Social Activities and Development Work**

Examples of student participation in community development work range considerably in their scope and formality. The most common form of community participation occurs during *mingas*. Coming from an Indigenous word for a community work day, the notion of a *minga* is described by Interviewee 3, "I live in an Indigenous community, and the principle there is to have *mingas* at the weekend. In a *minga*, one goes out and collaborates with the community." Interviewee 8 discusses participation in *mingas*,

You are talking about my day to day in the community. For example, we want water and the problem is that we want to take water to the houses and we need pipelines. We all have to participate in a *minga*: climb the mountain, close the river off a little, make a dam, and create water pressure so that it can be distributed below and every house will have river water.

Similarly, Interviewee 6 explained that, "They [the community] always have *mingas* to clean the paths or the river. To this type of activity all the commoners go, men and women. They take their shovels, their pickaxes, something which helps them to work."

The use of the word "commoners" in this last quotation highlights that such manual labor is often associated with poorer and rural areas. The requirement for such work may be in the form of a formal petition from a community leader. As Interviewee 21 explained,

In the *mingas*, the president of the community summons a meeting; the word is passed from house to house or we find out from friends, we go and ask what we can do. It could be cleaning the street because at times it gets cluttered with debris or paving stones have come out, or we need to clean the water pipelines.

In addition to *mingas*, community participation takes on numerous other forms. Interviewee 3 discusses people's participation in formal community processes, "In the meetings they make the decisions for the community, when a project comes from the municipality, or to look at problems in the community. They take decisions together to perform a project. Also, to elect the community's directors."

Other forms of participation in community activities include special interest groups, political activism on behalf of the community, assisting the elderly, tuition for children, and, notably, PDE students who use their university education to train and improve capacities within the community. For example, Interviewee 18 said, "I took the decision to perform leadership workshops in Cotacachi for young people from Indigenous communities. Within these workshops I had support from the ethnic diversity program and some organizations in Cotacachi."

Further examples abound, including Interviewee 2's training of members of an Indigenous federation in tourism, hospitality management, and customer service, and the following example of entrepreneurship provided by Interviewee 25:

We managed to reestablish a community house which was in a terrible condition. So, with the help of materials we put our hands to work, and built. The roof was about to fall in. We gave life to the house again; we installed a café in order to create income [for the community].

These initiatives reflect the reciprocal and solidary customs associated with ethnically diverse people's participation in community development in Ecuador. The varied forms of participation range from the provision of manual labor to participation in decision-making and the transfer of knowledge.

### **Correlations between Community Participation and Classroom Collaboration**

As described above, community participation and classroom collaboration share theoretical underpinnings. The interview data provide some insight into how previous experience with community participation benefits students during cooperative and collaborative learning projects. A total of seventeen Interviewees discussed this relationship, with the majority view being that experiences of community participation provide students with skills that can subsequently be put to good use in the context of classroom collaboration. Such skills include group leadership, public speaking, communication, ideas generation in groups, and overcoming fear of social participation. Interviewee 6 discusses the benefits of collaboration for ideas generation, saying, "Better ideas come from various heads. It can be that a project is much more viable, more worthwhile, through teamwork." On learning to lead, Interviewee 2 said, "I have come to understand that everyone thinks differently, so you have to act according to the situation... you should never strongly impose yourself if you want to lead." Among other students who also discussed leadership in terms of adjusting to group harmony and dynamics was Interviewee 18, who said, "Everyone has their own way to present an idea or way of thinking, and, well, to be a leader or part of a tolerant group you need to know how to deal with this."

There was widespread agreement among interviewees that participation and collaboration are similar, although the difference between the two is the long-term nature of community participation. Through much longer associations and initiatives, processes of participation build confidence and trust within communities, something to which classroom collaboration does not approximate. For example, Interviewee 16 mentioned the following, "In my community [they are] people I know and trust and I can open myself up directly. By contrast, here in the university classmates change each semester and I can't open myself up totally." For this student, in comparison to long-term community participation, classroom collaboration feels forced and to some extent fake. Interviewee 21 said that, in the classroom, "when we have to work as a team you have to collaborate because you have to collaborate." One more perspective comes from Interviewee 23, who said, "To share in the community needs more time, is more tiring, needs more organization, and months of preparation."

The careful analysis of these opinions indicates that students with experience in both community participation and classroom collaboration perceive long-term group activities as being more authentic and with a greater potential for unlocking the cognitive potential of collaboration. Notwithstanding these insights, the prevailing view perceives both a high value in academic collaboration, and close ties between one's experience in community participation and preparedness to collaborate well in the classroom.

### **Improvements for Better Collaborative Learning**

Some of the issues with group work discussed by interviewees are ones to be expected regardless of context, while others are pertinent to collaboration in more diverse groups. Problems of a more general nature include those associated with different personality types, such as with group members who simply prefer to perform work individually rather than participating in groups. A lack of commitment from one or more group members is another global issue, as is the ability of groups to remain interested in and focused on the task. Finally, two interviewees discussed acute problems with group members whose personalities were so strong as to dominate group proceedings. For example, Interviewee 5's example of a poor collaborator was, "Someone who has more knowledge and does not allow others to have their opinions."

The same interviewee relates a personal experience of group conflict which ended in a strong argument, the only way forward from which was a task division strategy that finally resulted in an incoherent presentation. Interviewee 21 relates an extreme experience of suffering the ultimate sanction of ejection from a collaborative group,

Once, I was in a group in economics in which there was a guy studying to be a lawyer, who supposedly was a good leader, we were all with him, he was charismatic. But later, without telling us why, he removed me and my friend from the group. I don't know why because we had attended all the meetings.

Interviewee advice for improving classroom collaboration focused on the role of the teacher and the length of learning projects. Of the seven interviewees to discuss possible improvements to classroom collaboration, five recommended that the role of the teacher/professor should encompass facilitative work in order to harmonize groups and regulate problems. This is the type of pre-collaboration preparation which authors such as De Hei et al. (2015) have previously identified as lacking in the skillset of many teachers.

Among other insights, Interviewee 17 discussed the idea of creating groups based on students' personality types. To give just one example, this resonates with Meslec's and Curşeu's (2015) analysis of Belbin roles in CL groups. Interviewee 2 argues the onus is with professors to notice when students are not participating well and intervene, including in severe cases where group members have been marginalized and become distanced from the group. Others, including Interviewee 14, believe it is the responsibility of the group itself to resolve issues through communication. Likewise, Interviewee 20, one of two students to mention the word "consensus" when discussing improved collaboration, espouses the importance of creating a framework of rules and behavioral norms for long-term collaboration.

## Discussion

This study set out to discover the perceptions and experiences of ethnically diverse students, often with participation experience in local community development, of classroom collaboration in a private Latin American university. The results show that these students face numerous challenges, which collaborative projects can serve to exacerbate.

Following Curşeu's and Plutt's (2013) observation that diverse collaborative learning groups are more likely to experience conflict than homogenous groups, the interview evidence highlights that diverse collaborative groups can actually replicate conditions of inequality, which those groups must then either negotiate or ignore. Financial and social disparities magnify when groups must collaborate outside the classroom, displacing to social settings, such as restaurants, which may serve to exclude disadvantaged students. For teachers looking to lessen the impact of inequality, the logical solution is to refrain from assigning collaborative work as a homework task, and instead design collaboration as an in-class activity.

When collaborative work is assigned as a homework or evaluation activity performed outside of class hours, the findings show that, in the majority of cases, the collaborative exercise becomes one of task division. Such activities may or may not be designed for a deeper form of collaboration, according to Hod's and Ben-Zvi's (2015) continuum; but, timetable and workload issues result in the use of task division as a pragmatic solution. Again, in-class collaboration is necessary to avoid this eventuality if task division is not the desired collaborative learning strategy. The data, both from the survey and the semi-structured interviews, indicate a strong preference for group work. These findings concur with, for instance, a study by Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2017), which found that students preferred working in small groups to performing group work with the class as a whole.

One of the research questions aimed to assess the connections and correlations between participation in local community development and classroom collaboration. The interview data demonstrate the frequency, depth, and variety with which many interviewees participate in community and social work. Also apparent is the idea that skills and experiences from community development work are transferable to classroom collaboration. Nevertheless, the short-term nature of many collaborative exercises stands in contrast to the long-term nature of participation in community development. According to some, classroom collaboration exercises can therefore feel, to some extent, forced or fake. Indeed, one prominent recommendation made by interviewees was to lengthen collaborative learning exercises in order to achieve deeper and more meaningful participation. Adopting this suggestion would provide an opportunity for educators to employ classroom collaboration as a means of bridging the gap between ethnically diverse students and their classmates, since the former feel comfortable in both team member and leadership roles. The data show that engaging in collaboration is one area in which DLE students do not feel at a disadvantage in comparison with their peers.

Following De Hei et al.'s (2015) observations that lecturers lack either the experience or the ability to successfully manage group composition and cohesion, the

findings highlight a particular issue in relation to dealing with social loafing. Students related that their professors were unwilling to intervene in such circumstances, with the most common response being to do the loafer's work for them. The necessity for such action highlights a lack of preparation or provision for more satisfactory responses, just one example of the type of "pre-collaboration" work advocated by a number of interviewees.

To find solutions to some of the issues surrounding the implementation of collaboration in the classroom, future research could draw inspiration from the reciprocity and solidarity of *Buen Vivir/Sumak Kawsay*. By fostering commitment to a sense of community with an emphasis on rights and obligations, the aim would be to reduce the frequency and impact of obstacles to good classroom collaboration. Indeed, this could further help students from ethnically diverse backgrounds to assume more prominent roles in the classroom.

### Limitations

This study has contrasted community participation and classroom collaboration from a broad perspective, without studying any particular community in-depth. Given the plurality of Indigenous nationalities in Ecuador, discussed in the method section, a significant amount of Indigenous knowledge remains to be explored. Moreover, the Indigenous communities in Ecuador represent just a small portion of the Indigenous peoples existing globally, each of whom will have a different perspective on the themes of this research.

### Conclusions

This study highlights the factors inhibiting the ability of ethnically diverse students to achieve parity with their peers at a private university. The data also show both the linkages between participation in community development and classroom collaboration, and the frequency with which students coming from Indigenous backgrounds engage in community participatory development.

While comparative quality of prior education often results in students from diverse backgrounds beginning their university careers at a disadvantage to their peers, experiences with community participation mean they are well-prepared to collaborate in groups. Although classroom collaboration is more temporary and less profound than participation in community development, the findings of this investigation show that, despite challenges, interview respondents are comfortable assuming team and leadership roles in the context of collaborative learning activities. Deeper collaboration, for example practices adopting Indigenous principles such as reciprocal and solidary participation, could provide further opportunities for disadvantaged students to engage with parity in the classroom.

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## Appendix A. Interview Protocol

### Preliminary questions

- 1) What is your first language?
- 2) What is your ethnic background?
- 3) In what year/semester of study are you?
- 4) What is your major?

### Qualitative interview questions

- 5) As a student, what are your strengths and weaknesses in the classroom?
- 6) What kind of topics do you prefer to study in classes? What type of classes do you enjoy most?
- 7) In relation to collaborative work with other students in class, or group work, what have been your experiences at the university?
- 8) Give an example of a typical collaborative/group work activity. How long does the activity last, and what are the parameters given to you by the professor?
- 9) What are the positives and negatives of group work/collaboration in university classes?

- 10) Describe your participation in group activities, and how does this participation differ between courses?
- 11) What are the factors that either facilitate or obstruct your participation in collaborative groups?
- 12) How (if at all) do you think group work/collaboration with other students improves your learning experiences and outcomes?
- 13) What is your preferred role in group work (leader, follower etc.)?
- 14) Tell me about one specific experience, it could be either negative or positive, of participation/collaboration you have had during a university class. If it was positive, what went well and why? If it was negative, how and why did problems arise?
- 15) What is your experience of participation/collaboration outside of the university (community, neighborhood etc.)? Explain the types of community participation in which you have participated.
- 16) Compare your experiences of community participation with collaboration in groups in the university classroom. What are similarities? What are the differences?
- 17) How could classroom collaboration activities be improved? What actions could the professor take to improve the process of collaboration in groups?

## Appendix B. Survey data

