

## Cooperative Learning and Peer Group Relations

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### Abstract

Learning environment for the present century must be one in which students are actively engaged with learning tasks and with each other. Today, there is competition in all spheres of life and in all sorts of engaging technology, and the expectation that children will learn passively is becoming increasingly unrealistic. Cooperative learning offers a proven, practical means of creating exciting social and engaging classroom environments to help students to master traditional skills and knowledge as well as develop the creative and interactive skills needed in today's economy and society. Cooperative learning has established itself as a practical alternative to traditional teaching, and has proven its effectiveness in hundreds of studies throughout the world. In every stage of life, peers are of paramount importance. Cooperative learning is a type of structured peer interaction emphasizing positive human relationships, collaboration between peers, active learning, academic achievement, equal participation, and equal status of students in the classroom. The present paper is an effort to highlight the impact of cooperative learning on peer group relations.

*Without the cooperation of its members society cannot survive, and the society has survived because the cooperativeness of its members made survival possible.... It was not an advantageous individual here and there who did so, but the group. In human societies the individuals who are most likely to survive are those who are best enabled to do so by their group.*

(Montagu A.)

### Introduction

The interaction among peers in the classroom is a normal and essential part of the learning process that influences the lifelong learning habits of students. The potential effects of peer relationships are reciprocal: Some students are more receptive than others. On one extreme, for example, is the student who values and seeks peer input on every decision; on the other is the social isolate who avoids interaction in and out of the classroom.

With entrance into education, the influence of the family decreases, as the importance of peers increases. Adolescence marks the peak of peer influence. The demands and opinions of friends can overwhelm the needs of family and, at times, can overwhelm the individuals themselves. As the individual matures biologically and cognitively, the culture of education also changes, moving the student through a system marked by a single class in early elementary school to a system of hour-long classes in middle and high school. Student peer preferences also change during these years. Friendships of two to three students give way to larger group networks.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the relative consistency of peers allows them to take precedence over academics and educators in later education. In addition to school structure, factors such as biology, home life, and increased personal responsibilities have also been explanations for students' decreased academic motivation and increased receptivity to peer influence. Whatever the causes, the subculture of the peer group can be very telling in determining students' motivation to succeed in academics.

In short, the relative influence of peers or peer groups typically increases with the age and development of the student. So, in the same way the multiple functions of peers also increases. A younger student may be able to find the motivation and desire to learn apart from classmates and friends, looking instead to values from home and teacher. Older students are more apt to seek out those who have similar interests and values.

Cooperation, creativity, and responsibility all these things seem to become involved in the coming century. Cooperative learning promotes higher achievement, more positive relationships among students and healthier psychological adjustment than do competitive or individualistic experience. One of the most consistent research findings is that cooperative learning activities improve children's relationships with peers, especially those of different social and ethnic groups.

Cooperative learning is one of the most remarkable and fertile areas of theory, research and practice in education. Cooperative learning exists when students work together to accomplish shared learning goals. Each student can then achieve his or her learning goal if and only if the other group members achieve theirs. When engaged in cooperative activities, individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and to all other members of the group. Working in cooperative groups, students learn valuable social skills, use higher order thinking and rehearse and practice new concepts, processes and information. Cooperative group does not happen successfully unless it is well-orchestrated and certain healthy considerations prevail. These considerations increase the chance that the group will work well together and achieve targeted standards (**Gregory & Chapman, 2002**).

Research on cooperative learning demonstrated “overwhelmingly positive” results and confirmed that cooperative modes are cross-curricular. Students who fully participate in group activities, exhibit collaborative behaviors, provide constructive feedback, and cooperate with their groups have a higher likelihood of receiving higher test scores and course grades at the end of the session. Cooperative learning is an active pedagogy that fosters higher academic achievement. The positive outcomes include academic gains, improved race and social relations and increased personal and social development. Cooperative learning has also been found to increase attendance, time on task, enjoyment of school and classes, motivation, and independence.

Cooperative learning can be defined as a range of concepts and techniques for enhancing the value of student-student interaction. Thinking skills and creativity are promoted when students interact with their peers to brainstorm, explain, question, disagree, persuade, and problem-solving. Cooperative learning offers many tools for structuring this type of thinking interaction.

Cooperative efforts result in participants striving for mutual benefit so that all group members benefit from one's efforts, recognizing that all group members share a

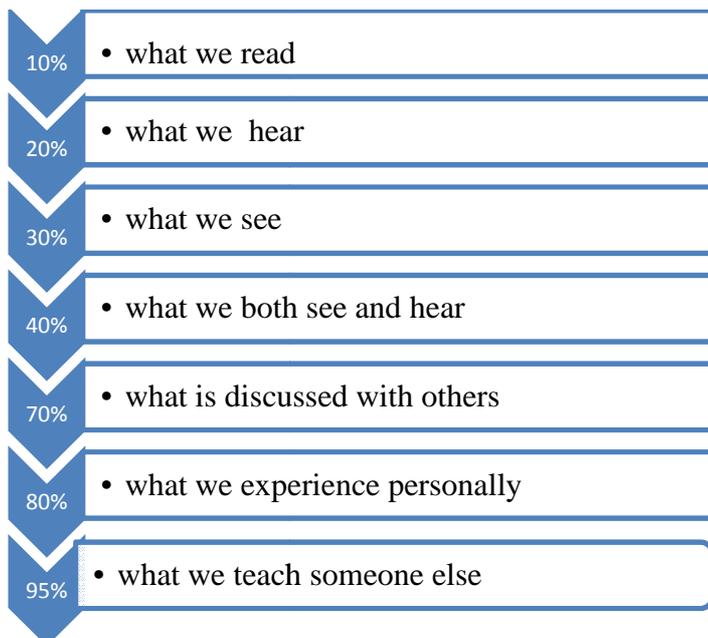
common fate, that one's performance is mutually caused by oneself and one's colleagues, and feeling proud and jointly celebrating when a group member is recognized for achievement. Pupils are serious achievers when working together with peers. Each one desires to do one's fair share of work within a committee. Fast learners can assist the slower pupils to achieve and do well. They can learn as well from the slow learner, in return too. Pupils need to learn to get along with each other and to respect each other's abilities to unitedly move towards a shared goal. Together, the pupil may achieve more than working individually. Learners may motivate and challenge each other in a committee setting and yet efforts are harmonized to attain togetherness in an educational endeavor. They must respect diversity among pupils and ideas. Group cohesion is necessary so that the goals of cooperative learning are consistently attained. All need to participate actively and achieve maximally. Tasks need to become clear through interacting with each other.

In cooperative learning small groups provide a place where:

- learners actively participate;
- teachers become learners at times, and learners sometimes teach;
- respect is given to every member;
- projects and questions interest and challenge students;
- diversity is celebrated, and all contributions are valued;
- students learn skills for resolving conflicts when they arise;
- members draw upon their past experience and knowledge;
- goals are clearly identified and used as a guide;
- research tools such as Internet access are made available;
- students participated in their own learning.

### WHY CO-OPERATIVE LEARNING?

In the words of William Glasser, We learn



Because cooperative learning groups encourage positive social interaction among students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, they have great potential to

facilitate the building of cross-ethnic friendships and to reduce racial stereotyping, discrimination, and prejudice. When students work cooperatively, they have the opportunity to judge each other on merits rather than stereotypes (McLemore & Romo, 1998).

The extensive classroom use of cooperative learning strategies contributes to positive peer relationships both directly and indirectly. Over a thousand research studies have documented many benefits of cooperative learning (Benard, 2004; Marzano, 2001) which include: improvements in academic outcomes, positive peer relationships, social skills, empathy, motivation, acceptance of diversity (ethnic, racial, physical), conflict resolution, self-esteem, self-control, positive attitudes to school, and critical thinking (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2001; Slavin, 1995). Cooperative learning and cooperative group work have also been associated with lower levels of bullying, an increased ability to tolerate different perspectives on the same issue and increased levels of assertive problem-solving skills (Johnson & Johnson & Stanne, 2001; Ortega & Lera, 2000)

### **PEER GROUP**

A peer group is a social group consisting of people who are equal in such respects as age, education or social class. These people usually share a common interest and background. They can also be very diverse, with people from different social and economic backgrounds, race, culture, etc. Peer relationships provide a unique context for social and emotional development of a person enhancing person's reasoning abilities, concern for others, cooperating with people. Modern research echoes these sentiments, showing that social and emotional gains are indeed provided by peer interaction. The term peer group refers to an individual's small, relatively intimate group of peers who interact on regular basis. Peer groups consist of individuals who share friendship, hang around and talk to each other as well as do activities together. As children develop into adolescents, they spend an increasing amount of time with their peers compared to their parents or other adults (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1974).

Peers serve many important roles in the life of a developing child. From toddlerhood through adolescence, peers serve to meet the child's need for acceptance and belonging. They provide valuable messages regarding the child's socialization...informing the child, through words and actions, which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. Peers serve to provide children a source of support in times of difficulty or stress, they share in times of joy and excitement, and they participate in learning activities providing motivation, competition, and companionship. We cannot ignore the powerful impact of the peer group on a child's healthy growth, development and socialization. Peer groups have a significant influence on psychological and social adjustments for group individuals. They provide perspective outside of individual's viewpoints. Members inside peer groups also learn to develop relationships with others in the social system. Peers, particularly group members, become important social referents for teaching members' customs, social norms, and different ideologies.

*Peer Group plays an important role in:*

- **Enhancing the feeling of self-confidence-** Human beings have natural inclination to be accepted by the people around, and healthy self-confidence endorses to back up. Self-confidence is the approach one develops for oneself.

Self-confidence should be the core around which acceptance and praise by people around should be the icing. A strong but humble self-confidence will help one at times when people around get changed. Further, helps to motivate others when the team spirit smashes.

- **Getting Along With Others** – In order for a child to successfully get along in group settings, to establish a peer group and to form lasting friendship, the child must have the necessary social skills. This requires the child to be capable in a “give and take” relationship. The child must learn to consider another person’s perspective, use effective communication skills, listen, observe body language, compromise, negotiate, and effectively balance the needs of him/herself and another person. Sometimes, as children learn and develop these skills, they need feedback to monitor and adjust their behavior. Peers can give some of the most effective and clear feedback.
- **Developing Morals and Values** – Sometimes we are afraid to think that our children’s morals and values are, at least in part, developed through their interactions with other peers. But this fact should be reassuring to us rather than frightening. Peers offer another source of learning, about what is right and what is wrong, and what aspects of life are most important.
- **Learning Appropriate Socio-cultural Roles** – Children do learn a lot about societal expectations and how to relate to the opposite sex through their interactions with peers! For instance, children also look to their peers for what is an accepted ambition in life, what is an acceptable about of leadership, initiative, assertiveness, independence, competitiveness, etc. These are all a part of our process of socialization and fitting into our socio-cultural roles in society.
- **Achieving Personal Independence** – Finally, peers are invaluable in providing the support necessary for a child to become independent of adults. The four different formats are:
  - **Physical Support:** the provision of physical belongings or material possessions, such as sharing clothes, toys, money, a car, etc.
  - **Social Support:** the provision of acceptance, belonging, companionship such as just hanging around and talking, being available for a phone call in the evening, sitting together at a ball game, etc.
  - **Intellectual Support:** the provision of information to a friend, giving directions to a party, discussing a school assignment or helping with homework, etc.
  - **Emotional Support:** the provision of empathy and understanding such as listening when a friend is down, understanding why a friend is so mad at her parents, being that “shoulder to cry on”, etc.

Students in cooperative learning method were more effective for English as compared to the traditional learning. Furthermore, cooperative learning seemed to be more favorable for overloaded classes (Khan, 2008). Hernandez (2002) reported that team learning improved student’s motivation and additionally reported that promotes active and higher level of thinking. Haberyan (2007) and other have reported that team based learning is motivating, interesting and enjoyable, and has been utilized in science, education, business and medical disciplines with positive results groups tend to face dramatic changes.

Cooperative learning researchers and practitioners have shown that positive peer relationships are essential to succeed in school and college life. Isolation and alienation are the best predictors of failure. Two major reasons for dropping out of school and college are failure to establish a social network of friends and classmates, and failure to become academically involved in classes (Tinto, 1994). Working together with fellow students, solving problems together, and talking through material together has other benefits as well (McKeachie, 1988; McKeachie, et al., 1986)

Peers play a role in social development and learning related to empathy, caring, social responsibility, negotiation, persuasion, cooperation, compromise, emotional control, conflict resolution and more. Peers also provide social and emotional support and are socialization agents who model and mould other's behaviours and beliefs and solidify their own. The impact of peers begins with early learning.



### How does Cooperative Learning Work on Peer group relations?

#### ✓ Motivational Effect

The various features of cooperative learning, particularly positive interdependence, are highly motivating because they encourage such achievement-oriented behaviors as trying hard, attending class regularly, praising the efforts of others, and receiving help from one's groupmate . Learning is seen as an obligation and a valued activity because the group's success is based on it and one's groupmates will reward it.

#### ✓ Cognitive Development Effect

According to Lev Vygotsky, collaboration promotes cognitive growth because student's model for each other more advanced ways of thinking than any would demonstrate individually. According to Jean Piaget, collaboration among peers hastens the decline of egocentrism and allows the development of more advanced ways of understanding and dealing with the world.

#### ✓ Elaboration Effect

New information that is elaborated (restructured and related to existing knowledge) is more easily retrieved from memory than is information that is not elaborated. A particularly effective means of elaboration is explaining something to someone else.

#### ✓ Enthusiastic Effect

Students taught through cooperative learning exhibits positive effect on enthusiasm among peer group. Another way in which cooperative learning contributes to high levels of motivation is in the proacademic attitudes that it fosters among group members. In peer group students are found to be more energetic, lively when are under cooperative learning strategy. Probably because of such features as promotive interaction and equal opportunities for success, cooperative learning has been shown to have a positive effect on motivation inducing attributions.

#### ✓ Attainment/Achievement Effect

**Slavin (1995)** examined several dozen studies that lasted four or more weeks and that used a variety of cooperative-learning methods. Overall, students in cooperative-learning groups scored about one-fourth of a standard deviation higher on achievement tests than did students taught conventionally. This translates to an advantage of 10 percentile ranks (60th percentile for the average cooperative-learning student versus 50th percentile for the average conventionally taught student). But the beneficial effect of cooperative learning varied widely as a function of the particular method used. The best performances occurred with two techniques called Student Teams-Achievement Divisions and Teams-Games-Tournaments.

*Cooperative learning has a positive effect in increasing peer attachment among individuals.*

Interacting with peers is a primary impetus for change because children are very forthright when stating their ideas. They speak directly to each other in ways that can be understood easily, and children are strongly motivated to reconcile differences between themselves and others (**Damon 1984**). Furthermore, children are often more receptive to their peers ideas than to those of their teachers because peers ideas are seen as more personal and less threatening

Motivation plays an important role in the development of social skills and the facilitation of interactions between peers. David and Roger Johnson draw upon the extensive experience they have had in conducting research on co-operative learning to highlight the important role motivation plays in academic success and ways in which schools can foster motivation in their students.

Research into Cooperative versus competitive learning has also addressed the influence of cooperation on children's peer relations and social skills. **Putnam, Markovchick, Johnson and Johnson (1996)** examined the effects of cooperative learning on peer acceptance in a study conducted with regular education students and special education students enrolled in the same classroom. The regular education students rated their classmates desirability as work partners at the beginning and end of the study. Results indicated that the regular education students peer ratings of their regular and special education classmates were more likely to improve if these students had been taught in the cooperative environment.

**Ashman and Gillies (1997)** examined the effect of cooperative learning on peer interaction. Results indicated that students trained in cooperative learning skills exhibited more prosocial behavior than their untrained counterparts. For instance, students trained in cooperative learning were more helpful and cooperative, and to strove to include group members by using inclusive words such as 'we'. They actively helped each other by providing explanations and assistance. The cooperative learning students also performed better than untrained students on a questionnaire assessing learning.

### ***FINAL WORDS***

Co-operative learning activities provide an ideal vehicle for teachers to structure the environment for successful peer interactions and to provide students with the

coaching and support they need to develop their social and emotional skills and understanding. Co-operative learning in early childhood can develop positive attitudes towards school and learning, and towards peers, and can provide abundant opportunities for learning how other people think, for developing language skills, and for learning how to solve interpersonal problems. Teaching the skills needed for effective peer interaction early in children's school life can provide the foundation for success at school, and for success in life have a collaborative and trusting relationship with the teacher. That is, young children are capable of effective cooperation if the teacher establishes a supportive classroom environment, models co-operative skills, and has a positive and personal relationship with students.

Co-operative activities with young children must be appropriate to their skills, abilities and interests if they are to be effective at promoting their social development. While many children of all ages seem intrinsically motivated to engage in co-operative work or play with their peers, others seem to take a forced attitude towards peer interaction (**Howes and Ritchie 2002**).

Because students play an active role in the learning process in cooperative learning, student satisfaction with the learning experience is enhanced. Cooperative learning also helps to develop interpersonal relationships among students. The opportunity to discuss their ideas in smaller groups and receive constructive feedback on those ideas helps to build student self-esteem. Cooperative learning creates a safe, nurturing environment because solutions come from the group rather than from the individual. Under such conditions, even very young children can benefit greatly from working cooperatively with their peers.

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