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What's Different about Cooperative Learning? – and its Significance in Social Studies Teaching

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"It's nice to know that I am able to vary my teaching technique and my motivation has been my children who have thus far reacted positively."

(an in-service participant's comment)

So you've been asked to use the cooperative learning approach?

The revised primary social studies teacher's guides advocate the use of the cooperative learning approach. Cooperative learning activities have also been suggested in the teaching of English language and primary science. This article will discuss some practical issues related to the use of cooperative learning in the primary classroom in Singapore, with particular reference to social studies.

The term cooperative learning refers to instructional methods which get students to work in small groups (usually 4-6 members) and reward them on the basis of their group's performance (Slavin, 1987). Small group learning has been used in its various forms for decades and is based on well-established theory in social psychology. Such an approach is of particular significance in social studies teaching, as the subject is essentially a study of human behaviour and interaction. Using cooperative learning in social studies classrooms can help the pupils to learn directly about belonging to a group and to experience what responsibility to the group really means (Stahl, 1992).

The feature of deliberately encouraging cooperative behaviour in groupwork is a more recent development. Cooperation in groupwork means "pupils working together to accomplish shared goals" (Johnson & Johnson, 1992). When cooperative learning is used in social studies, the pupils will be encouraged to learn the lesson material together, help each other in working through questions and at the same time, encourage each other to do well. This is what cooperative learning aims to do - and its specially designed structures help the teacher to organize and manage the social interaction among pupils so as to bring about cooperation. To illustrate :

"(To encourage cooperation), I'd use Numbered heads together. I'd have the students sit in teams... each student would have a number - 1,2,3 or 4. I'd ask a question as I normally would but then say, "Put your heads together and make sure everybody knows," After the students had a chance to make sure everybody on the team knew the answer, I'd call a number : "Number 3's, what's the answer?". Now with that structure, when a question is asked there is a buzz of participation among all students in the classroom. And instead of feeling bad when someone else is called on, students are glad that another student knows the answer."

(Kagan, 1990)

How is cooperative learning different from regular groupwork?

Although cooperative learning is part of the larger group of small-group methods, there are some important differences in the way cooperative group activities are organized. Cooperative groupwork is based upon the theory that interdependence among members is the essence of groups. The premise is that "if learning objectives are structured cooperatively, then pupils will assist, encourage and support each other's efforts to achieve" (Johnson & Johnson, 1992). This theory of cooperation has been applied to how group activities should be organized:

Cooperative Learning Groups

1. Heterogenous membership
2. No appointed leader, leadership is shared
3. Shared task - interdependence
4. Each member is accountable for the group's performance
5. Members held responsible for each other's learning
6. Members are taught to use social skills
7. Group processing is conducted

Traditional Learning Groups

1. Homogenous membership
2. A leader is appointed in each group
3. Task may not be a shared one - no interdependence
4. Individual members not accountable to group's performance -> free-riders
5. Each person is responsible only for himself
6. Social skills are assumed or ignored
7. No group processing

(Adapted from Johnson, Johnson & Holubec (1991), unit 1:14)

While the content of the social studies lessons will be like those in a regular classroom, the manner in which pupils work in their groups will be different:

(a) The pupils will be working in heterogenous groups

Each group will be made up of boys and girls; different racial groups, higher, average and below-average pupils will be working together. These heterogenous groups are "home groups" who will cooperate for a sufficient period of time to enable trust and friendships to develop.

(b) Assigned work will be group-based rather than individual

The tasks pupils work on will be group-based. Task interdependence will be a feature eg group members complete a worksheet together or produce something as a team. In the process, each member will have some specific role to play (eg writer, reporter, resource captain...) and the roles will be rotated among group members.

(c) *Pupil behaviour will reflect helping and sharing*

Pupils will be encouraged to cooperate, help each other learn and share information. Responsibility for learning will be a goal to be achieved by the group working together.

(d) *Group behaviour will be monitored and evaluated*

At the end of a group activity, the pupils will be given some time to talk about how well they worked together. At times, pupils may give each other feedback on how effectively they are practising social skills with their team-members.

What forms of cooperative learning structures can be used?

Cooperative learning structures are models that have been designed for teachers to use. The structures incorporate different, interesting ways of organizing the pupils to enhance cooperation. The structures (Kagan, 1992) outlined in this section are suitable for primary levels and may be used with any social studies topic. Specific instructions for using the structures may be found in the social studies teacher's guide.

- ***Turn to your neighbour:*** A quick method of getting pupils to share an idea with another (eg What do you know about...? Tell your neighbour one interesting thing which you learnt about...?). Takes just 3-5 minutes.
- ***Listen-think-pair-share:*** When the teacher poses a question (eg What dangers did the early pioneers face?), the pupil first thinks about the answer himself, then shares his answer with his neighbour and they jointly improve their answers.
- ***Numbered heads together:*** This structure can be used to get teams to learn some material together (eg Name all our reservoirs. Where are they located?). Upon a cue from the teacher, the teams put their heads together to learn the material. When study time is over, the teacher will call out a particular number to give the answer on the team's behalf. Every team member is therefore held accountable for learning the material.

Pairs check: This is a simple structure to get pupils to help each other while they practise a new skill or worksheet. As one pupil works on a question, the partner checks for accuracy. They switch roles after each question.

- **Sequential roundtable:** The purpose of the roundtable is to get pupils to list as many ideas as they can (eg types of vehicles in the neighbourhood). This activity is useful for eliciting pupils ideas during the introduction or conclusion of a unit of work.
- **Team webbing:** Can be used after a sequential roundtable activity. This activity gets pupils to organize their ideas in a semantic or concept map. A variety of webs may be created and the best ones can be displayed.
- **Send-a-problem:** This structure is intended to encourage collaborative problem-solving. The challenge is for the teacher to select questions or problems that are divergent so that the pupils may think of a variety of solutions. This activity is likely to create a high level of excitement, and its success depends on skilful management by the teacher. It will probably take a whole class period to complete.
- **Jigsaw:** Jigsaw is the most complex and takes more time than the previous structures. It is nonetheless a useful strategy when text information has to be learnt. The method breaks down a text into different parts and gives each team member responsibility for becoming expert in one part. The pupils then teach their team-members what they have learnt in their respective parts (eg a study of Stamford Raffles may be divided into 4 parts : His early life, First accomplishments, Founding of Singapore and Town plan).

What management techniques can be used?

Managing cooperative learning presents a different challenge to the teacher. No longer will pupils be made to sit and listen as the teacher speaks, then work silently at their desks. Rather, they will be allowed to talk with each other in small groups. The management

routines for cooperative learning therefore include seating arrangements, controlling noise and monitoring pupil interaction in groups.

Some of the following techniques may be used:

The quiet signal: The use of nonverbal cues to gain pupil attention during groupwork eg when the teacher wants to give further information. The signal is the teacher's raised hand and when the pupils see this signal, they respond by:

R aising their hand

S top talking

P assing the signal to teammates

A ttention focussed on the teacher

6-inch (15-cm) voices: A technique to get pupils to keep their voices down and speak softly during groupwork.

Talking chips: Can be used to get more balanced participation among team-members and ensure that all members have a chance to participate. The teacher distributes chips equally among the team members (eg each pupil gets 2 chips). When a team member contributes an idea, he puts his chip in the team pile. When a member's chips are used up, he may not offer any more ideas till others have used their chips. Then the chips are redistributed and a new round begins.

TTT rule: With the TTT (Team-then-Teacher)rule, pupils have to clear their doubts with their team first and ask for the teacher's help only when the team cannot resolve the problem. The teacher hence responds to team questions, not questions from individual pupils.

Why teach social skills during cooperative learning?

Asking pupils to work together in heterogenous groups can produce friction and conflict. Some children may not like their assigned team-mates or disagree with their ideas. It is therefore advisable to teach pupils social skills to help them deal with interpersonal differences. Social skills refer to the skills of dealing with people. These skills may be as simple as "taking turns" and "saying please and thank-you", or more complex abilities such as "giving praise", "encouraging participation" and "resolving conflicts".

A strategy that can be used to teach social skills is the T-chart method:

The Skill of "Giving Praise"

<i>Looks Like</i>	<i>Sounds like</i>
1. Pat on the back	1. Good work
2. Thumbs up	2. Great idea
3. High five	3. You were fabulous
4. Clap	4. Fantastic
5. Cheer	5. Clever!
	6. Right on

The T-chart method is intended to help pupils learn a social skill by breaking it down into its component behaviours - non-verbal and verbal. Once the T-chart has been drawn up (this can be done by pupils themselves), the pupils will be asked to practise using the skill. In order to encourage practice of social skills, the teacher may assign roles to individual pupils during groupwork:

Social Skills	Corresponding Roles	Role Description
Using quiet voices	<i>Quiet captain</i>	Makes sure that the team members speak in soft tones.
Giving praise	<i>Praiser</i>	Encourages teammates with phrases like "Good job" or "Great idea".
Giving encouragement	<i>Encourager</i>	Encourages shy and reluctant teammates with phrases like "Let's hear what Pete has to say".
Offering help	<i>Coach</i>	Helps teammates when they have problems, but must not do their work.
Checking understanding	<i>Checker</i>	Responsible for ensuring everyone in the group understands the work.
Taking turns	<i>Gatekeeper</i>	Shuts the gate to the member who is talking too much and opens the way for another who is saying very little,
Staying on task	<i>Taskmaster</i>	Keeps the group on-task with phrases like "Let's work on this" or "Stop fooling around".

What have pupils to say about cooperative learning?

The use of cooperative learning in social studies has of course to be relevant to the recipients' (pupils) needs and interests. In terms of benefits, we have said earlier that cooperative learning can contribute to the value objectives of social studies. Moreover, we have found in our classroom observations and conversations with pupils

that they do enjoy the approach and acknowledge benefits of cooperative groupwork:

"It has been far more interesting than normal lessons whereby we just read and learn from the textbook."

"They (cooperative learning activities) were very interesting and by doing this, it changed my personal opinion that too many cooks spoil the broth. Also it made social studies not as boring as what I thought in the past."

(comments of pupils)

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