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Cooperative Learning in Singapore Primary Schools: Time for Reflection

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Introduction

Cooperative learning in primary schools in Singapore is attracting increasing attention as an alternative to the more traditional competitive and individualistic approaches to teaching and learning. Many school principals are encouraging their staff to familiarise themselves with cooperative learning techniques; heads of departments are conducting in-service courses on cooperative learning for teachers, often in conjunction with neighbouring schools; and students from the National Institute of Education are using cooperative learning strategies while on teaching practice.

Benefits of Cooperative Learning

The benefits of cooperative learning have been well-documented. According to Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson and Skon (1981), Sharon and Shachar (1988), and Bossert (1988) cooperation among students in classroom situations

- * improves academic achievement in a variety of subject disciplines;
- * generates a supportive and secure learning environment;
- * improves relationships between peers, and between teachers and pupils;
- * facilitates communication between class members;
- * builds knowledge and trust; and
- * improves self actualisation and mental health.

In addition, cooperative learning promotes the Singapore Government's intention of generating a harmonious, multi-racial society by encouraging students to gain greater understanding and respect for other ethnic groups.

Cooperative Learning in Singapore Primary Schools

In Singapore primary schools, cooperative learning is often used for sessions of sixty or perhaps ninety minutes, once or twice a week, as an alternative to the more formal approach where the teacher dominates the proceedings and children are expected to sit passively and listen. Typically, cooperative learning sessions are well-structured and well-organised. Decisions about placing pupils in heterogenous, multi-ethnic groups are made before the start of the lesson; materials are readily available; children move into their groups in a well-ordered, disciplined fashion; tasks are made clear to the children; and teachers check for understanding.

Unfortunately, the process of cooperative learning is often less than satisfactory. As students are accustomed to working independently there is little interdependence within groups. In some cases, groups are dominated by the most forceful individual who takes over the whole task. In the "Jig Saw" exercise, for example, where individual members of the group are given separate parts of the whole to learn and they must teach what they have learned to other members of the group, the dominant pupil often quickly finishes his own task and proceeds to take over the responsibilities of other group members. In other cases, students with low self-esteem are sometimes reluctant to put forward their views when invited to do so and are often "bullied" by their peers to make a response. In the "Sequential Round Table," where students take it in turns to make a written contribution to an exercise on one sheet of paper before passing it to the next person, some students display evidence of boredom and impatience while waiting for their turn to write and tend to be aggressive or insensitive towards slower members of the group.

Unfortunately, many teachers assume that children have the all-important social skills needed to make cooperative learning a success and often ignore group dynamics. The concept of

cooperation is simple, but it is not easy to implement. Switching classroom procedures from individualistic and competitive learning to cooperative learning is a complex and long term process.

Time for Reflection

In view of the inadequacies of cooperative learning cited above, teachers could employ three strategies to ensure that cooperative classroom situations are, indeed, cooperative. The first is to practise social skills. Many students do not come to school with the social skills they need to collaborate effectively with others. They need to be taught and to be given the opportunity to practise appropriate communication, leadership, trust, decision-making and conflict management skills, as well as being provided with the motivation to use these skills in achieving group success. This is particularly important in the Singapore context where individual success is promoted through the award of individual grades.

The social skills required for cooperative learning can be practised at regular intervals during the week as a preliminary to fully organised cooperative learning sessions. One excellent way to practise cooperation is through *Listen – Think – Pair – Share*. The procedure is outlined below.

1. Listen: students listen as the teacher poses a problem.
2. Think: students are given time to think of their individual responses.
3. Pair: each student pairs with a neighbour and together they discuss responses.
4. Share: a few students are asked to share ideas with the entire class.

During the *Think* sequence, pupils can be encouraged to write down their responses on a sheet of paper. This helps pupils to formulate ideas in a logical manner and the written ideas act as a basis for discussion in pairs.

The whole sequence of events allows individual pupils to be actively involved in thinking through a response to a problem and sharing/verbalising their response with at least one other person. This strategy encourages the formulation and exchange of ideas, collaboration, peer support, and achievement.

The second strategy that teachers could employ to encourage cooperative learning, is to remind pupils at regular intervals during the course of the lesson that the objective of the lesson is to work together to achieve a common goal. Of course the end result is important, but the process is equally important and this must be stressed throughout the session.

At all times, the teacher could emphasise the following expected behaviours:

1. all students contribute and listen;
2. everyone listens to others with care;
3. be patient and wait your turn.

Teachers should stress frequently that individual grades will not be assigned and students are not competing against each other. Rewards depend not on doing better than someone else, but on doing well with someone else.

The third strategy which could be used to encourage cooperative learning is monitoring. Teachers could use a regular classroom patrol to ensure that children are, in fact, working cooperatively. An eagle eye should be kept open to spot individuals dominating the group or excluding reticent pupils by being impatient or insensitive. During the course of the patrol, the teacher could use the following to encourage cooperative learning:

1. give immediate feedback and reinforcement for learning;
2. determine what group skills have been mastered;
3. praise use of good group skills;
4. determine what group skills are neglected and need to be taught;
5. evaluate how well the groups are functioning.

Obviously, the teacher does not want to disturb the groups if they are working well, but by carefully monitoring the activities of the children the teacher can ensure that the important social skills necessary for successful cooperative learning are being employed.

Conclusion

Cooperative learning is being used more frequently in primary schools in Singapore as an alternative to the traditional teacher oriented classroom. Although many cooperative learning sessions are well-structured and well-organised, unfortunately many children do not work cooperatively. Some students dominate the whole activity while others exclude their slower working peers by impatience and insensitivity.

To ensure that cooperative learning is, indeed, cooperative teachers need to encourage students to practise important social skills; reiterate that the objective of a cooperative learning session is to complete a task by working together; and carefully monitor the activities of children during the lesson.

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