Cooperative Learning:
For (4) Teachers Working Towards Social Justice

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“If teachers want their students to learn mutual assistance, collective
decision making and shared responsibility for task performance, they,
teachers must practice what they preach in the classroom.”
—Thomas F. Logan, 1986

Connecting Social Justice and Cooperative Learning

While we each had a great group of students in our respective classrooms, there
was incredible diversity in terms of student attitudes towards school and each
other, and student ability levels reflected within those classrooms. When each of
us attempted group work, it seemed that the same students were always chosen
first to be in these groups by their classmates, and others were always chosen
last. The hurt looks on the faces of the students chosen last were very difficult to
see. We often found ourselves forming the groups and ensuring the inclusion of
those usually chosen last, but in the process, we were taking away any say that
the students had in choosing their workmates.

We also noted that there was often conflict during group work that manifested
itself as students who were not listening to each other, or as one student doing
all the work and using their own ideas without any input from their partner or
group members.

When we observed our classes, we saw that our students did not have the
cohesiveness and positive attitude towards each other that we knew was
possible. Hence, our decision was to look towards building a more inclusive
environment in our classrooms.

As a cooperative unit of four teachers ourselves, we decided to attempt to
change our classroom environments through cooperative activities by having
students work in teams to complete tasks. We felt then, and still do now, that
to teach for social justice teachers must include every student in a meaningful and
positive manner. For us, social justice means that all students feel included and
that the contribution to class work of each student carries an equal amount of
weight and importance. We feel that cooperative learning activities allow our
students to showcase their individual strengths through reading, writing,
drawing and acting. We were hoping to shift the existing power relationships
that were in our rooms and allow every student’s talents to be shared with their
classmates.

Cooperative activities can give a sense of power to those who feel that they do
not have a voice. This includes the students who don’t ever speak in front of the
large group or the artist who can’t read and who does not have a regular forum
to share his or her talents with others. Cooperative activities give those students a chance to shine in a system that often legitimizes the best readers, writers, and athletes, but does not see the inherent value in asking our students to care for each other.

The activities that we carried out in our classrooms asked students, some for the first time, to listen to each other and also to rely on each other to make contributions to the activities.

Connecting to the Research Literature

Having discussed with one another what cooperative learning meant to each of us, the next step was to read what the literature had to say about cooperative learning.

Delving into the research, such as the work by Slavin (1990), Slavin and Stevens (1990), and Kagan (1990) resulted in finding a great deal of support for cooperative learning. No one advocated against cooperative learning or even expressed reservations with it. There were authors of papers who acknowledged that there was some controversy amongst proponents of cooperative learning, but this was mainly focused on differing methods of measuring results. The authors were still in favour of cooperative learning, but questioned data collection, comparisons, and which elements to define as crucial (e.g. leadership, trust, decision making and inclusion) to cooperative learning.

Our main goal was to develop a more inclusive classroom, so we turned to cooperative learning activities because they have been found to improve inter-group relations and improve social acceptance of all students (Slavin, 1990). Slavin also found that cooperative learning opportunities resulted in gains in self esteem, the liking of school and of the subject being studied, increases in time-on-task, and improvements in attendance.

For cooperative learning to be successful, certain elements are required: face-to-face interactions, individual accountability, group processing, and interpersonal skills (Schultz, 1990). Throughout the literature, there is an emphasis on the positive impact of group goals and individual accountability on improvements in student achievement. However, the literature does not address questions of whether or not these same elements are essential to improving inclusion (Stevens and Slavin, 1995).

The research does support the use of cooperative learning opportunities generally to move a classroom towards inclusion, noting that students who have experienced this type of learning demonstrate social behaviours such as active listening and effective conflict resolution more often than do students who are studying competitively or individually (Andersen, Nelson, Fox, and Gruber, 1988).

But, for cooperative learning groups to function well, the social skills that students need in order to work collaboratively, such as leadership, communication, and conflict management, need to be taught. Too often teachers mistakenly assume that students have the skills necessary to interact effectively in a group. To be effective, these social skills need to be taught, assessed, and the transference of them as learned behaviour skills promoted, before beginning cooperative group work (Andersen, Nelson, Fox, and Gruber, 1988).

According to studies by Slavin (1990) and Slavin and Stevens (1990), groups of two or three are the best for students engaging in cooperative learning. Also, heterogeneous groups (such as mixed ability levels) are more productive than homogeneous groups; it is recommended to assign to each group a student drawn randomly from high, medium, and low ability groups to foster heterogeneity (Andersen, Nelson, Fox, and Gruber, 1988). Our experiences make it hard to embrace this generalization. At times, it is in the best interest of the students to work in groups which allow them to benefit from the richness of the diversity, but at other times this richness can be overwhelming for a student with more limited skills, who may, in the face of it, shut down. Grouping based on similarity of needs is sometimes the route to go.

To implement cooperative learning, Kagan (1990) recommends the use of organized structures. Structures usually involve a series of steps with prescribed behaviours at each step. Structures lend themselves to any subject area and are exemplified by such teaching strategies as “round robin,” “think-pair-share,” and “jigsaw.” Individual accountability and working towards a common group goal are inherent in structures such as these, giving students experience with these crucial elements.

Having reviewed the literature, the common themes that emerged for us as
necessary for cooperative learning to occur were:
• common group goals
• individual accountability
• social skills training.

These are the elements we worked to ensure were in place in our classrooms when we set up our cooperative learning situations.

Throughout the literature, the “success” of cooperative learning was measured by the achievement of students taught in cooperative learning situations as compared to that of students in control groups who were not. However, cooperative learning also has a positive impact on inter-group relations, self esteem, attitudes towards class and school, and the ability to work collaboratively with groups (Stevens and Slavin, 1995). The “success” of cooperative learning processes should also give consideration to gains in these areas.

Unfortunately, also lacking from the research was the voice of students. It appeared that no data were obtained from students working in cooperative situations with regard to their feelings about cooperative learning or their preferences for cooperative learning in relation to other teaching and learning strategies.

Four Site Experiences

After having achieved a better understanding of the dynamics necessary for successful experiences with cooperative learning, we decided to try it out with our classes. The four snapshots that follow represent our individual experiences with cooperative learning and inclusion in our classrooms. The first two explore themes from student responses in a Grade 3 and Grade 2 class, respectively. The last two focus on observations of student interactions, one of a Grade 3, 4, 5 multi-age grouping and the other in a Kindergarten/Grade 1 split.

From the Classroom of Darrin Clarke

“I felt great because everyone participated…” (Mike)

I am a teacher in a suburban elementary school. I have been teaching for seven years, the last six at my present school. In my school district, elementary school is Kindergarten to Grade 5. Over my six years, I have taught every grade from K to Grade 5. When I conducted the research for this study, I was teaching a class of twenty-two Grade 3 students. The class consisted of low to middle class students. There were a few students who had recently emigrated from Eastern Europe, the rest were second or more generation Canadians. Within the class there were fourteen boys and eight girls. The academic range in the class was fairly narrow, with all student achievement profiles fitting within norms for that grade.

Having spent time equipping the students with common group goals, a sense of individual accountability, and the interaction skill of listening—all key elements for successful engagement in cooperative learning—it was time to engage the students in cooperative learning activities. After each activity (see Appendix A for descriptions of the activities), the students in my class reflected, in a written format, on their experience in the group. Some guiding questions that they considered while they were reflecting included:

1) Rate the group on how they worked.
2) How did you feel?
3) What did you like?
4) What did you not like?
5) What would you do differently next time?
6) How did this activity compare to the last one?

What follows is an analysis of the data gathered from those reflections. After reading over the students’ reflections, four themes emerged: Group Size, Interaction Skills, Decision Making, and Emotions/Feelings.

The first topic that resonated throughout the students’ feedback was Group Size. Here is a sampling of what they had to say:

Jane: It depends what activity we are doing then I can decide if I want to be in a partnership or group.
Emily: I liked there were only two people...it wasn’t too noisy...better than last time because there were too many people.
Karen: ...it would be hard because with only two people you would not get a lot of ideas.
Jay: It is easier when there are four or five people in a group.
Jay: Next time I would like to have more people in the group.
I was pleased with the students’ consideration of group size. I found the comment by Jane “... it depends what activity we are doing, then I can decide if I want to be in a partnership or group...” to be particularly powerful. Through experiencing a variety of cooperative learning scenarios, this student was able to conclude that her learning was based on subject/topic expectations and these would determine which learning circumstances would best suit her needs: partnership, group of three or group of some other size.

This voice both supports and contradicts Anderson, Nelson, Fox and Gruber (1988) in their findings that suggest groups of two or three are ideal. Their findings reflect data on achievement only. Jane’s voice points out that, yes, sometimes groups of two or three provide the best conditions for learning, but at other times, and for a variety of reasons, a larger group is better. The students’ insights on group size go beyond the literature I have read. Students recognize that they, as individuals, can and need to decide how they can best work. As Emily expressed it, “...I liked there were only two people...it wasn’t too noisy...better than last time because there were too many people....” Similarly, Jay perceived that the work was easier in a group of four.

Students realize that partnerships lend themselves to positive interactions, but that ideas are constrained in them by the limited number of people. They also recognized that larger groups are challenging because of the turn taking and listening dynamics involved, but that the responsibilities in them are shared and they hold out the potential for a more expansive idea pool. I think that these observations reflect important distinctions that could only be made by students who had gone through having the experience of participating in different cooperative groupings.

The second topic that dominated student feedback was that of Interaction Skills. Some of the comments students made in this area were:

Cory: I felt happy because everybody got to talk, we did this by talking in a circle.
Bob: One thing I did learn was that if you all talk at the same time you won’t get anywhere and your presentation won’t be that good either.
Arthur: What I like about this group is that before we went to something else we would first see if everyone agreed.
Tim: ...next time we should try to use better listening skills and give everyone more of a chance.

Cory: I learned to listen more doing this activity.
Cam: ...next time I’ll choose a group that I know will listen.

The literature highlighted the importance of social interaction skills in preparing for cooperative learning opportunities. It wasn’t until I read the students’ reflections that I understood that this feature is critical. I was quickly reminded that successful social interactions are based on active listening. Therefore, before the students engaged in further cooperative learning tasks, I taught active listening skills. Students contributed ideas and suggested behaviours that demonstrated active listening. These included appropriate body language and paraphrasing. In the words of Cory: “I felt happy because everybody got to talk, we did this by taking turns in a circle.” Conversely, students such as Bob noted that a lack of social skills had a negative impact on their sense of success, “...one thing I did learn was that if you talk at the same time you won’t get anywhere and your presentation won’t be that good either....”

The student feedback pointed out that social skills go beyond active listening and that time needs to be spent on taking turns, providing positive feedback and engaging in conflict resolution. Teaching these skills is important because, as educators, we cannot assume that students possess these abilities. Even teaching listening skills does not guarantee that the students will employ them as Cam indicated: “...next time I’ll choose a group that I know will listen....” To equip my students to have successful, positive, cooperative learning experiences, I need to teach other skills, like decision-making, too.

The third topic that emerged in student comments was Decision Making. What follows is a sampling of what they had to say:

Mike: I felt good because there was no arguing and I listened.
Bob: It was tough working with this group because I was the one who usually had to calm everyone down.
Karen: ...tough...putting the story together because we had a lot of ideas and we couldn’t put all the ideas in.
Cam: ...we didn’t work together...we had to use rock, paper, scissors....
When students don’t possess appropriate decision making skills, they resort to what they know, decision-making processes that don’t involve reason, like rock, paper scissors. Students recognized that the most challenging aspect of cooperative learning is making group decisions. As Karen noted, it was “...tough putting the story together because we had lots of ideas and we couldn’t put all the ideas in....” Students also felt the power of effective decision-making when they encountered it. As Mike observed, “…I felt good because there was no arguing and I listened ....”

The fourth key topic was students’ Emotions/Feelings. This theme was carried in student comments such as:

Karen: I felt happier because I did not have to talk to 3 other people and I got a chance to write a lot.
Mitch: ....felt great ...everybody was listening to me.
Karen: I did not feel very good because not everyone in the group was listening to me.

The range of emotions experienced by students covered a broad spectrum. Some reported they felt great and good while others, like Karen, reported negative emotions, “I did not feel very good because not everyone was listening to me....” Interestingly, most of the feelings the students described related directly back to the use (or lack thereof) of interaction skills. Students felt good when being listened to and heard, and poorly when there was a breakdown in the use of positive interaction techniques. This reinforces the importance of teaching interaction skills, and of ensuring that transference of them is encouraged in a wide range of situations.

If cooperative learning is going to work to achieve inclusion, then students must be properly equipped to handle the responsibilities (e.g., of being members of functioning groups). Clearly, when students do not have the skills to work in groups, groups can become emotionally charged, a situation which leads to a poor learning environment which, in turn, certainly does not contribute to a sense of inclusiveness in the class.

At the outset of this project, my goal was to create a better sense of inclusion in my classroom. The problem with assessing my success in relation to this goal is that there was no baseline data on inclusiveness in my classroom against which to make a direct comparison. In my professional judgment, my classroom did develop a greater sense of inclusion following the development of interactive skills and the use of cooperative activities. Initially, one of my concerns was that groups had been formed based on popularity and friendship, without considering any other factors. However, the latest examples of my students forming into groups demonstrates that group formation is more than the simple finger pointing at friends that it used to be. It has become a thoughtful, dynamic and successful experience for students, one that takes into account different needs in different learning contexts.

From the Classroom of Bill Urquhart

“I liked it when we were listening and we loved both of our ideas.” (Claire)

I am a primary teacher in a suburban elementary school located in the city of Port Coquitlam. I have been teaching for seven years, the last six at my present school. In my school district, elementary schools are arranged from Kindergarten to Grade 5. Over my six years I have had the opportunity to teach
grades from Kindergarten to Grade 3. At present, I am teaching a class of twenty-one Grade 2 students. The class consists of a group of low to middle class students. Within this class there are eleven boys and ten girls and the academic range is quite broad including students working at a late Grade 3 level in many subject areas and others working at a beginning Grade 1 level in all academic areas. Overall, this group of students interacted very well with each other.

My continuing quest is to gain a stronger understanding of cooperative learning. For this study, my goal was to expose my students to cooperative learning tasks that would encourage group formation in a more spontaneous, inclusive manner than they had been using to date.

For the purpose of this study, students were asked to participate in the following:

1) a series of five Language Arts-based cooperative lessons (see Appendix A for a description of these)
2) class debriefs
3) reflection worksheets

As I reviewed the students’ written and oral reflections after each cooperative activity, as well as my own observations, I began to note themes of Decision Making, Inclusion, Leadership, Academic Support, and Off-Task Behaviours emerging. Each of these themes is explored below.

As the following student comments suggest, a major concern for students centred on the issue of Decision Making:

• “Everyone said their thinking—we had a vote—no one fought—only one choice.”
• “Our group was good because we [didn’t fight] over who should go first. We voted and [stuck] with it.”
• “…we first decided if we wanted to vote or not and we decided yes. We voted for Sue’s ideas….”

As a teacher observer, I noticed students:

• using a voting system of raising hands, secret ballots to decide which story version they wanted to share with the class.
• negotiating participation opportunities. One student exclaimed, “If you get to write, then I get to circle the words!”
• using a tally sheet to record peers’ story choice.

I was impressed with how students created processes, (e.g., secret ballots, raising of hands, tallies, etc.) in order to solve various problems such as who gets to handle the pictures first, whose story will be used for the purpose of sharing, who gets to write first and, who gets to handle the pictures/props first. This act of ‘decision making,’ as indicated in the students’ reflections, had an impact on all of them as they worked in their cooperative groups. Moreover, this was an area of cooperative learning in which students needed to further develop their skills. Researchers, Bonnie K. Natasi and Douglas H. Clements (1991) further support this assertion when they suggest that teachers must teach and model conflict resolution skills such as negotiation, compromise, and cooperative problem solving.

A second theme emerged around the topic of Inclusion. Students noted:

• “It was fun because we usually don’t get to work with partners.”
• “I think it was [great] to get to work with the people I never get to work with. It was kind of like a way to make people have friends.”
• “I liked how we worked together and I liked how everybody was cooperating and listening.”
• “What was good I think was my group all got to arrange a part of the story.”

As an observer, I noticed the following examples of ‘inclusion’ as the cooperative learning activities played out:

• Claire, a shy student, is handed a piece of paper. She is slow to respond, but her group moves around her in a very positive and supportive manner.
• Sylvia, a weak student, shares her ideas. Her partners are sitting and listening patiently as she slowly expresses her thinking.
• Sally, while organizing the pictures, attempts to involve Joe, a weak student, by asking him, “Joe, you tell us what you want.”

The literature strongly supports my finding that cooperative learning activities help to create a more inclusive environment (Natasi and Clements, 1991).
A third theme focused on ‘Academic Support.’ Students said:

- “We all came close together to listen and help people write and listen to their story.”
- “People were helping to figure out a story or helping to spell words.”
- “I felt good working with my partner because we took turns writing and when one person was writing the other was thinking of a story and telling it.”
- “Billy told me how to spell words. It was great!”

These students’ reflections, and my own observations, reaffirmed the important role that cooperative learning tasks can play in supporting the academic development of children (particularly those who are academically challenged). Researchers Robyn M. Gilles and Adrian F. Ashman also support these claims. They assert that when students with academic challenges interact with their peers, they receive feedback and support (scaffolding) that help them clarify issues and build understandings (Gilles, Ashman, 2000). Similarly, they suggest that these reciprocal interactions probably serve to maintain the interest of low-achieving students in group tasks, while at the same time supporting their efforts to solve problems and construct new understandings (Gilles, Ashman, 2000). I couldn’t agree more!

A final theme that emerged focused around Off-task Behaviours. Students shared the following comments:

- “One kid in our group wasn’t listening and we had to retell the story again so that person could learn the story. That’s why I found it challenging.”
- “Tony was not listening to Sally and he kept on switching the two pieces of paper [even] when Sally told him no…he kept on doing it.”
- “I saw my partner talking to Alyssa….”
- Janice and Lisa were bothering us by playing with my stuffed animals and goofing off so it was very hard to work. So I picked the number 5.”
- “Sometimes they were being so goofy. And sometimes they were so noisy. Next time we do this I want a new desk group…."

When I reviewed the students’ reflections and my own observations, it became very apparent to me that many students lacked the necessary skills to complete parts of a cooperative activity successfully. I’ve realized that although I’ve always been a big advocate of cooperative learning, I haven’t really taught my students these skills. Students didn’t really know what was expected and I could see off-task behaviours that I would attribute to this skill gap.

My quest now is to take steps to reduce the amount of off-task behaviour that continues to take place during cooperative learning activities. For this, I will depend heavily on the many suggestions for helping support students become more aware of the interpersonal skills and group behaviours required for successful cooperative learning that can be found in articles by Slavin (1987), and Gilles and Ashman (2000).
I teach in a school that encourages teachers to collaborate in their planning and teaching, and I team teach with another Grade 3, 4, and 5 teacher. At the time of the study, my class consisted of twenty-three Grades 3, 4 and 5 students who were from a variety of cultural, social and economic backgrounds. Most students were designated English as a second language learners; a few were English as first language learners. Student achievement levels in the class were within the widely held expectations for children of their ages for all except three students whose achievement levels were academically lower than all other students. There were no students with an official special needs designation in my class.

During my observations of the group work for the activity “Building from Clues” (see Appendix A for a description of this activity), I focused for a few minutes on one group. This group included a little boy named Tim who is academically far behind his counterparts. As I observed him sitting passively, and listening and watching the other students in the group boisterously doing the activity, the question I asked myself was, “What is Tim gaining right now?” As I continued to observe, I noticed that Tim wasn’t passive, but was actually engaged; his eyes were bright, he was keenly aware of his group and their ideas as they shared them, and twice he gave a yes or no response to the ideas of the others. This realization reminded me that not all students can and should play the same role in group situations. Students who need to, will quietly observe until they are ready to step into another role and feel comfortable enough to do so. In this case, Tim needed to see the modeling available from other students as they engaged in cooperative group work many more times before he would be ready to take a more active role in that work. So the answer to my question, “What is Tim gaining right now?” is that he was gaining valuable time to observe his peers and to learn from and with them.

Although my initial perception about this student was that he was very passive in his role in the cooperative group activities, I now believe that students like him gain much more when they are quietly observing members of a group than they do when they are alone. Students working on their own are not always engaged in active learning. Further, by working alone they miss the opportunity to see, and therefore learn, many skills like organization, communication, facility with language, and critical thinking. I believe that all students learn differently and the role that they play in a group is the role that they need to play in order to learn effectively at any particular time. This does not mean that some months or years later the role will be the same; quite likely it will change and this will be due to the modelling that they have seen in the past.

Consequently, I have revised my outlook on all students and instead of trying to make them fit into some standard that I think as a teacher they need to reach, I believe it is much more valuable for these students to do what they need to do in order to be successful learners. One of the essential features of cooperative learning is that the success of one student helps other students be successful. Cooperative learning supports all learners because the structure and activity associated with cooperative learning itself allows for contributions of many different kinds: artistic, verbal, social, written, and beyond.

Inclusion in the classroom is an important step towards social justice. Students can be taught that working together and making everybody feel included is an important endeavour because it allows us all to feel good about each other and about ourselves. The responsibility for teaching this life lesson is one that is shared by everyone in the classroom, not just the teacher. Hopefully this understanding and this sense of responsibility translates into actions well beyond the confines of a classroom.

Robert E. Slavin suggests in his book Cooperative learning: Student teams (1989), that when students are taught that the classroom is a place of individualistic competition, it follows that it is also a place of embarrassment, of anger, and of an established pecking order. In such a place, students are unwilling to help each other and may go as far as calling each other names when one performs better than the others. Slavin then asks the reader to imagine a structural change in the classroom. In this restructured classroom, students are

Appendix A

"We got more ideas when we worked together..." (Tim)
asked to work together. Now, the goal is to see what they can do while working together. In this situation, students will want to make sure that everybody in the group has a good understanding of the activity. They will each feel responsible for each other’s learning.

Thomas F. Logan (1986) states that, “if teachers want their students to learn mutual assistance, collective decision making and shared responsibility for task performance, they, teachers, must practice what they preach in the classroom” (Logan, p.125). My students are able to see how my teaching partner and I work cooperatively to plan and teach the classes. This modelling will encourage students to help each other, teach each other, and make more of a group effort.

From the Classroom of Miranda Hounsell

“We are a team…” (Jesse)

I teach in a small annex on the East Side of Vancouver in an area that draws students from a range of ethnic communities. Every one of my students speaks English as their second language. The neighbourhood is working class, but my class includes students from households that range from very needy to quite well off. This year my class consists of fourteen Grade 1 and four Kindergarten students.

I was surprised to find out how much I enjoyed “spying” on my students. It was freeing to be able to sit back and really focus on the conversations between the students instead of feeling the pressure to step in, interfere, and keep the students on task and working towards completing an assignment. Frankly, I was curious to see how they worked together and not whether they finished the task to the best of their abilities.

For purposes of ensuring everyone contributed to an activity using Venn diagrams (see Appendix A for a description of the activity), the comparison of their favourite things was the perfect topic. Everyone was on task because they each needed to contribute their thoughts to be able to complete the task. Each team was unique and brought a different approach to the task. One group recorded only the things that they had in common. Other groups were looking at anything and recorded each favourite thing, whether they had it in common or not. They seemed excited regardless of their findings.

Jesse and Steven were the group that seemed to struggle the most. Steven, who is a high functioning Kindergarten student capable of writing a perfectly spelt sentence or two, was fooling around and off topic. Jesse, who is an emergent speller in Grade 1, struggled to keep Steven on track by asking him questions about things that he liked.

On the carpet for the debrief I asked the students what they thought about working with a teammate. Steven put his hand up and responded that he really really really really really liked working with a teammate. I responded by asking him to, “Tell me more. What was the best part?” He said he liked having turns. Steven rated group work on the 0 to 10 scale as 100.

Before sending them off to their journals to record in writing and drawing what it was like to work with a partner, I told them I hoped that they would share their honest feelings. If it was hard then I wanted to see a zero. I wanted their true feelings and thoughts; I didn’t want them to rate the activity a 10 because they thought that is what I wanted. To encourage honesty, I made sure that students knew their journals would not be shared with any other students.
For many of my Kindergartener’s and Grade 1’s, writing is still a struggle. They are able to be far more expressive and verbose in their feelings orally. The actual job of writing bogs them down. So, as the students worked, I walked around and talked to some of them, feeling as though I might get more out of them through the more informal medium of conversation in which they could more comfortably express themselves. I was particularly interested in what Steven was going to say, because of the striking difference between what I had observed during the activity and what I had heard in the debrief on the carpet. Looking in his writing book, I saw that Steven had given the teamwork a zero and said, “My partner did not let me do anything.” I wasn’t too sure what to think. I went to look at Jesse’s book and he had rated group work a 10, and had written down “It was fun.” At this point I became aware of how vital on-the-spot observations were going to be for me.

Looking back, I can see that if I am looking at this study as a way to include every student and encourage them to have more caring attitudes towards each other, then it was reasonably successful, even though Steven’s journal entry suggested he wasn’t overly thrilled with the experience. What I saw was two students who don’t choose to play with each other talking and exchanging ideas, even if they were off topic and discussing Pokemon cards! Jesse showed a great deal of persistence in attempting to recapture Steven’s attention and to focus him on their assignment.

Reflections

Where do I even start to describe what I have learned through this experience? I don’t think that there is an easy answer to that question. I have learned the importance of action research. I always felt that I could just read a book, talk to my colleagues or instinctively know what was best for my students, but I have come to realize that there is a whole wide world full of practical researchers who are there (like my teachers) to offer assistance and guidance with both practical questions and processes that enable you to research your own questions. These guides are there to light my way and to give me perspective and some insight into topics about which they have much more information than I do.

An article by Roger T. Johnson and David W. Johnson called “How can we put co-operative learning into practice?” (1987) spoke to me directly as a practising teacher who is interested in delving into co-operative learning. It deals specifically with questions that I had, and it helped me focus on where I might get started as a researcher. It encourages teachers to replicate well known studies on student interaction, saying, “Every careful replication adds to our understanding” (p.47). The authors share their own research topics and carefully explain the questions they have and how they are going to go about answering them. For example, they think that co-operative learning best suits situations that involve problem solving, decision-making, and critical thinking, and they wonder why co-operative groups “handle these tasks better than students working alone” (p.48). This question was similar to the one that I started with in the beginning. After combining the background knowledge from articles and my own experiences with implementing co-operative learning situations in my classroom, I have come to the conclusion that cooperative learning does help shape a more positive classroom environment.

The more time my students have spent working cooperatively in a variety of groups, the less time I have had to spend working on social problems. Mistakes that the students make are now more often shrugged off with the words, “That’s okay, we all make mistakes,” than they were before they had experience with cooperative learning. One of my students, who is a non-reader but an extremely talented artist, was able to shine in each of the groups in which he worked. Other students noticed his abilities when working with him, and commented on them. No longer did he feel that he did not measure up to the others in terms of his reading and writing.

These activities have opened all of our eyes (his, the other students, and my own) to the fact that everyone has talents in different areas, and everyone can contribute to learning. This student has become more confident in all aspects of school life and is making wonderful progress, not only in his reading and writing, but also in terms of his behaviour. For him alone this research has been such a positive experience that I would continue to use as many cooperative learning activities as I can in the future.

It is true that the more you do cooperative learning activities, the easier they become for the students. You have to experience an activity a number of times...
before it becomes familiar enough that the students are comfortable with the format and can relax and truly experience cooperative learning. The more my class was thrown together in cooperative learning situations, the easier it was for them. The atmosphere created by cooperative learning activities carried over into other aspects of classroom life as well, and we all began to refer to ourselves as a team. Our team worked together when problems with students from other classes arose out on the playground, as well as when they had to choose partners for games during their free time.

Our cooperative ethos also spilled over into how the class lined up. A discussion began when one student asked whether they had to save someone’s spot in line when a student had to go back to get something that they had forgotten. As a class we sat and discussed the relative merits of saving a space and not saving one. Those who shared their ideas for saving a spot in line used terms such as “we are a team,” “it is nice to be friends with everyone,” and “sometimes people make mistakes and that’s alright.” All of the positive support that I had hoped to see at the beginning of this investigation was coming out and pervading all aspects of our class.

I plan to scream what I have learned through this study from the rooftops. This is important because we teach more than academics. So much time can be spent fixing little problems and complaints that you feel more like a social worker than a teacher. I truly believe that a positive classroom environment means everything. It allows the learning to happen for every student. Listening to other teachers in the staff room, I realize that many of the problems they are having are social ones, like the ones that I have seen in my own room. These problems can be addressed, and student attitudes and behaviours can be changed in positive ways. I have seen such a massive change in terms of these things in my students already that I know that cooperative learning activities can help do this in other classrooms too. I now cannot wait until September. I will be starting these activities with my new class and can only imagine what might be.

**Bringing the Four Voices Back Together: Concluding Remarks**

Although the initial objective the four of us shared was to create a more inclusive tone in our respective classrooms, we discovered that, while we worked towards that goal, our focus shifted to cooperative learning and the skills necessary to achieve it.

As a group we found that the literature we read on cooperative learning was consistent with our research findings. Common group goals, individual accountability and social skills training did appear to be necessary ingredients for successful cooperative learning to occur.

Our research was twofold involving: our experience as a group of collaborating teachers, and the work we did in our individual classrooms to give our students opportunities to work collaboratively with each other through cooperative learning activities. We found our experience of collaborating on this project, and our decision to conduct research as a group of four practicing teachers, was a powerful demonstration for us of what we were reading in the literature. We are able to see the workings of our group dynamics, the four of us, and the parallels of our working relationship in our classroom practices.

In the process, we recognized trust as a necessary ingredient in successful cooperative learning. At this time, this is an element that requires further investigation. Trust seemed to be naturally present among the four of us; our question is: how can trust be built in a classroom setting? This issue was not addressed anywhere in the literature we encountered.

Reflecting over our action research, we are reminded of the importance of bringing the student voice into research, and of the major themes that emerged from students’ reflections and our classroom observations. Students consistently, in all four classes, reflected upon the elements of Decision Making, Listening Skills, Talking, Academic Support, Inclusion, and Feelings of Exclusion. As a result of completing this action research, we have come to value the following. We believe that:

- cooperative learning is one avenue which teachers and students can embark on to create a more inclusive and socially just classroom.
- students need to be explicitly taught skills in order to be successful cooperative learners.
- it’s important for each school and class to have its own unique voice.
- using cooperative activities in a consistent manner from Kindergarten to Grade 7 will create a more inclusive, socially just school.
we, as teachers, need to model the expected behaviours related to cooperative learning in the context of cooperative learning activities and beyond them.

To better facilitate an inclusive community in our classrooms we would start using cooperative learning activities at the beginning of the school year, and carry them on throughout the year. Cooperative learning activities helped us create that inclusive environment we were seeking.

We are working toward social justice in our classrooms and schools by constantly asking questions, looking at our practice, giving students varied learning experiences, and by teaching cooperative learning.

As inquiring practitioners we are left with some of the following questions:

- How do we go about teaching the interpersonal skills and individual behaviors needed for successful cooperative learning?
- Is it realistic to expect that students with cognitive and social challenges can be taught to work effectively within a cooperative group setting?
- What resources are available to help us develop and strengthen students’ interpersonal skills and individual behaviors needed for successful group cooperation?

It is with these questions and a strong desire to be reflective practitioners that we are hoping to make positive strides in our teaching development.

Looking back, we never imagined the power of cooperative learning that we discovered over the course of this investigation. In our classrooms it has, and will continue to, influence our personal pedagogy.

References


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**About the Authors**

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