

Cooperation is the key to success!

"What children can do together today, they can do alone tomorrow" Vygotsky, 1965

Getting students to work in groups is often perceived to be fraught with danger! However, if the learning experience is well conceived and planned, there can be real advantages for children and teachers alike. Research indicates that cooperative learning helps to accomplish a number of goals.

- The benefits include:
- the raising achievement of all students;
 - building positive relationships among students;
 - providing opportunities for healthy social, psychological and cognitive development.

Basic elements of co-operative learning

In order for cooperative learning to work effectively within the classroom, it is important to incorporate five basic elements.

1 Positive interdependence: Each group member must be aware that individual efforts benefit not only him or herself, but the other group members as well. The popular slogan 'one for all and all for one' exemplifies this relationship. This can be structured by establishing a shared, mutual, group goal. It can be strengthened by adding joint rewards, shared resources and assigned roles (Reader, Recorder, Reporter, Time Keeper).

2 Individual accountability: Individual group members must be responsible for carrying out his or her share of the work. The teacher can ask the group member, "were you effective in carrying out your role?" "Did you stick to your role?"

3 Group organisation: It is important that they are sitting 'knee to knee and eye to eye' in order for effective

discussion to take place. Groups should be:

- small, no larger than three or four;
- able to see the front of the room.

4 Interpersonal and small group skills: The teacher needs to make explicit the interpersonal and small group skills. This can be done by the use of role play. If the teacher was demonstrating the importance of listening skills they could set up a role play. Two children would be called out to partake in the activity. One child may be instructed to make no eye contact and no attempt to listen, while the other child could try to make conversation. The other children can be asked how effective this communication was and the feelings of the participants may also be explored.

Another method of explaining a social skill is through a T-Chart illustrated below. The teacher lists the skill e.g. Encouraging participation and then asks the class, "What would this skill look like (non-verbal behaviours)?" After the children generate several ideas, the class are asked "What would this skill sound like (verbal)?" The children list several ideas. The 'T Chart' could be placed in a prominent place on the wall illustrating verbal and non-verbal behaviour for example:

Encouraging Participation

Verbal sounds like...	Non Verbal looks like...
What is your idea? That's interesting! Awesome! Good idea!	Smile, Eye contact, Pat on the back, Thumbs up

However, it is important to start small, one or two behaviours to emphasise are enough for a few lessons.

5 Reflection: In order for groups to work successfully they must be given time to reflect on how well they are achieving their goals. In this way the group can decide on what needs to be changed and enhanced.

Questions to prompt reflection

- Are you happy with the amount of work you got through in the time given?
- Do you think you found out what you wanted to know?
- Could you improve on the work you have produced? If so, how?
- How did you find working together as a group?
- Are there actions within the group that need to be changed for the next task?
- What good actions need to be continued or improved?
- How will you celebrate your work?

Planning for Co-operative Learning

Setting out your objectives

Co-operative learning can be incorporated into many different subject areas. It is important to specify the particular academic and social objectives. For example, if the focus is on the theme of 'Clothes' in science, the following objec-

tives should be specified:

Organising class groupings
Groups can be selected by a teacher so that they are balanced in terms of:

- Gender
- Academic ability
- Personality
- Creative ways – In geography, for example, each child could be given a town in Ireland. The children whose towns are in the same county may group together.

When the group has been formed

When the group has been established, roles can be assigned such as a Reader, Recorder, Encourager of Participation and Checker for Understanding. Children can be given time to get used to working together before roles are given. The children should be placed in a close group away from other groups if possible and within view of the front of the room.

Use of materials/resources

When using cooperative learning the same curriculum materials apply. However, there are some very interesting things you can do with curriculum materials to increase cooperation among students. Each group can be given just one set of materials to share. Limiting the resources can ensure that the children have to work together to be successful. It is also possible to use a jig-saw procedure. In this case the assignment is divided up into

Science Curriculum Objective

Strand: Materials

- Strand Unit: Properties and characteristics of materials
- identify and investigate a range of common materials in the immediate environment
 - group materials according to their properties

Social objective

- to develop listening skills
- to encourage each member of the group to participate (relates to the T chart)

three parts like a jig-saw. For example, the assignment itself could involve a set of materials relating to a particular country such as Kenya.

Teacher's role in co-operative learning

- **Observation:** While the children are carrying out the task it is important to circulate to see whether they understand the material.
- **Feedback:** Praise good use of skill within the group.
- **Clarification and Assessment:** When the task is completed the children may assess how effective they worked as part of a group. This can be done in many different ways, one of which involves the children listing three things that they felt they did very well and one thing that they can improve the next time.
- **Success should be celebrated:** This type of group-work is particularly effective as it is inclusive of all children and can only succeed when each child contributes to the group.

Time

There are different types of co-operative learning, all of which require groups staying together for varied amounts of time:

Type Formal Cooperative Learning:

Description As in the 'Kenyan example' the children may work together for anything up to a few weeks to achieve shared learning goals. The following assignments could be carried out in this way:

- problem solving;
 - integrated units of work;
 - report writing;
 - conducting experiments.
- The children are expected to interact with their group mates, share ideas and materials, support and encourage each others academic and social achievement.

Type Informal Cooperative Learning:

Description Can last from a few minutes to just one lesson. This type of learning consists of 'focussed discussions.' After teaching the children about a particular topic for 10 minutes

STUDYING A FAR AWAY PLACE USING THE 'JIGSAW APPROACH'
Within their groups the children are numbered one, two and three. Person one carries out part one. Person two carries out part two and so on. (See grid below) The resources listed could be placed on tables at a central location in the room.

	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3
Resources	Artefacts could include Kenyan Materials Woven bag, Coffee beans, Sisal, Items of clothing, Newspaper articles, Wooden carvings, Kenyan currency.	A selection of photographs from Kenya including pictures of: natural features of the country, transport & communication people at work, buildings, industries etc	A selection of maps, globes and atlases
Task 1	Move to the artefacts table and establish as many facts about Kenyan culture as you can from the items.	Move to the photographs table and establish as many facts about Kenyan culture as you can from the pictures.	Move to the maps, globes and atlases table and establish as many facts about Kenyan culture as you can from the maps.
Task 2	Find another person (no. 1) from a different group who had the same task and see if you can find out any more information about Kenya from the artefacts	Find another person (no. 2) from a different group who had the same task and see if you can find out any more information about Kenya from the photographs .	Find another person (no. 3) from a different group who had the same task and see if you can find out any more information about Kenya from the atlases and maps
Task 3	Return to your base group and share with them what you have learnt about Kenya from the artefacts .	Return to your base group and share with them what you have learnt about Kenya from the photographs .	Return to your base group and share with them what you have learnt about Kenya from the atlases and maps .

Remember

Before any task is given to the children the assignment itself must be clearly explained – "Your task is to examine the photographs, artefacts and atlases in order to find out information about Kenya." It is also important that they are aware of the objective of the lesson. The objectives are sometimes given as outcomes – "At the end of this lesson you will be able to describe Kenyan culture and tradition." In addition, it is important that the children have a

clear idea of their role within the group. In the case of the above example, person number one must find out enough information about Kenyan artefacts in order for the group to complete a worksheet at the end of the lesson. That child is also aware that the teacher may randomly select a member of the group to provide information relating to these artefacts. Therefore each member is individually accountable for their own learning.

they must then go into pairs or triads. The group discuss a question in relation to the topic just taught. Two or three children from any particular group may be called upon to give a summary of the group's discussion thereby always ensuring that there is individual accountability. To conclude the lesson the children may summarise what they have learnt altogether about the topic that was covered.

Type Base groups

Description Long-term co-operative learning groups. These groups are responsible

for personal support. A grid might be completed in this type of group in order to record member's data, for example, favourite pastimes or books. The group members may support each other by discussing tasks, helping out with homework, editing each others work and generally clarifying work for each other if there is a lack of understanding. This group is important in terms of inclusion and support within the class. If a group is not working particularly well together this is not a good reason to separate the group. It is worthwhile persisting and

laying out very clear goals for this group. Each group can be monitored and interventions can be made at all times to reflect on how improvements can be made.

Conclusion

Cooperative learning may take time to implement within any classroom but hang in there! The results are worth waiting for. The development of team focused skills can be immensely valuable for life.

Compiled by members of the PCSP, SESE team.