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COOPERATIVE LEARNING: AN INNOVATIVE STRATEGY TO CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Innovation and reform are the two key factors in the development and progress of any education system and its practices and processes. New strategies of teaching and learning are being thought and practiced as most important inputs to bring about qualitative improvement in the education. Cooperative learning is one such approach which makes the students to learn as group to maximize their own and each other's' learning. The focus of this strategy is on inter-personal exchange of opinions, intellectual challenge, critical thinking, higher level reasoning-the skills which are highly valued in the age of globalization. It is being increasingly felt that thinking process of students is being suppressed by competitive learning environment prevalent in schools. The cut throat competition encourages negative interdependence. The school curriculum has to aim at not only enabling learners to acquire knowledge. The development of intrinsic values and emotional intelligence of learners are equally important. The cooperative learning helps in all round development of personality if applied systematically.

The paper focuses on the benefits of cooperative learning, provides insights into various cooperative learning strategies, their use in classroom situations and highlights a number of essential elements that must be met for deriving success from cooperative learning strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Children are the citizens of tomorrow and the future builders of the nation. The Kothari Education Commission (1964-66) has rightly observed," the destiny of India is being shaped in her classrooms. "Therefore it is essential to develop the logical and creative thinking of the children optimally. But the competitive environment prevalent in our schools is suppressing the

creative thinking process of the students. It is being increasingly realized that group learning techniques such as cooperative learning may promote inter-personal exchange of opinions, critical thinking, higher level reasoning, positive attitudes and social skills which are highly valued in the age of globalization.

WHAT IS COOPERATIVE LEARNING

The term" cooperative learning" refers to an instruction method in which students at various performance levels work together in small groups towards a common goal. The students are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own. Thus, success of one student helps other students to be successful. Unlike an individualistic classroom or a competitive classroom, students in a cooperative classroom sink or swim together. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. Students work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it.The claim of cooperative learning advocates, usually supported in field research, is that ordinary school learning is enhanced considerably when children, following one another or the cooperative learning procedures, learn in groups rather than on their own or in competition to other pupils. While traditional classroom instruction has always entailed a degree edition among pupils, cooperative learning practices require pupils to cooperate as a team and as a necessary condition of acquiring academic information. This usually means that the instructional outcome results from the pupil's common effort, that the instructional goal is shared and that each pupil's success depends upon and is linked with every other pupil's success and failure. Cooperative learning practices typically have pupils share materials, divide up the labour required to complete the assignment, assist the other members of the group and receive award based on group's performance.

BENEFITS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Many research studies have shown that when correctly implemented cooperative learning improves information acquisition and retention, higher level thinking skills, inter-personal and communication skills and self-confidence. (Johnson, et al, 1999).Cooperative learning experiences promote higher achievement than competitive or individualistic learning experiences. Working together towards a common goal leads to significant gains in academic achievement. In cooperative learning teams, low achieving students can make contributions to a

group and experience success, and all students can increase their understanding of ideas by explaining them to others. (Featherstone, 1986).Cooperative learning also promotes better mastery of content and longer retention of material. In cooperative learning it is essential to give oral summary, explanation and elaboration of one's information, ideas and conclusions. This process strengthens mastery of the content and storage of information. Cooperative learning stimulates divergent thinking. Since students are mixed as heterogeneously as possible on the basis of academic abilities, ethnic background, race and gender, they accommodate themselves to each other's different perspective strategies and approaches in completing assignments, laboratory experiments and projects, thus stimulating their divergent and creative thinking abilities. Cooperative learning facilitates improvement in quality of reasoning abilities. In most cooperative learning situations, students with incomplete information interact with others who have different perspectives and facts. In order to understand all the relevant information and the variety of perspectives and create a synthesis based on the best reasoning and information by everyone involved, students have to actively understand both the content of the information being presented and the cognitive and affective perspectives of the person presenting the information. Cooperative learning also encourages the process of generation of new ideas. Involved participation in cooperative learning groups inevitably produces conflicts among the ideas, opinions, conclusions, theories etc. When teachers structure controversies with cooperative learning groups, students are required to research, analyze, critically evaluate, rebut information and take the perspective of others. This results in new situations. Cooperative learning activities also tend to promote the development of essential communication skills, improved motivation, positive self- esteem, social awareness, positive attitude towards subject and school, tolerance for individual differences, group interaction, social skills and self-confidence.

KINDS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING INSTRUCTIONS

Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD): In this type of cooperative instruction students with varying academic abilities are grouped into 4 or 5 member teams in order to study what has been initially taught by the teacher and to help each one to achieve his or her highest level of achievement. After this students are given individual tests. Teams earn certificates or other recognition based on the degree to which all team members have achieved gain in achievement over their past record of achievement.

JIGSAW: In this cooperative exercise the teacher might divide academic material into parts and each member of the team would study one of the parts. Then the members of the different teams who had studied the same parts might meet to discuss and clarify their sections. After meeting with members of other groups who are expert in the same part, the experts return to their own groups and present their findings. They might teach and quiz their teammates about their section.

Listen- Think- Pair–Share-Model: It is multi-mode discussion cycle in which students listen to a question or presentation, have time to think individually, talk with others in pairs and finally share responses with the larger group. The teacher signals students to switch from listening to think, to pair, and to share by using clues. The benefits include longer and more elaborate answers, inferences supported by evidence and logical argument, increased student participation and improved achievement. Students individually or in pairs may write or diagram their thoughts. Teachers may cue them to reach consensus, engage in problem solving or assume the role of devil's advocate. The overall effect of these coordinated elements is a concrete, valid and practical system, made manageable and thereby acceptable to teachers.

Round Robin Brain Storming: Class is divided into small groups (4 to6) with one person appointed as the recorder. A question is posed with many answers and students are given time to think about answers. After the "think time", members of the team share responses with another round robin style. The recorder writes down the answers of the group members. The person next to the recorder starts and each person in the group in order give an answer until time is called.

Team Pair Solo: Students do problems first as a team, then with a partner and finally on their own. It is designed to motivate students to tackle and succeed at problems, which initially are beyond their ability. It is based on mediated learning. Students can do more things with mediation than they can do alone. By allowing them to do work on problems they could not do alone, first as a team and then with a partner, they progress to a point they can do alone what at first they could do only with help.

Reciprocal Teaching: Reciprocal teaching developed by Palincsar and Brown (1999) is a strategy of teaching in which the teacher and students take turns as teacher. The method is, both read a passage to themselves and the teacher demonstrates the process of formulating a question based upon the passage, summarizing the passage, clarifying it and making predictions based on the information contained in it. When the pupil takes a turn as teacher, the teacher carefully

coaches the pupil in these skills of comprehension and offers prompts and criticism until none is needed by the pupil, at which time the teacher's role becomes more passive.

Essential Elements of Cooperative Learning Groups in the Classroom

To be successful in setting up and having students complete group tasks within a cooperative learning framework, a number of essential elements or requirements must be met:

Public recognition and rewards for group academic success: It is essential that the teacher reward a pupil only when all members of the group succeed in learning the assignment or in the case where the teacher assigned the pupils different parts of a complicated task, only on the basis of the group's overall achievement and not according to the merit of any individual pupil's contribution to the group's effort.

SA clear set of specific student learning outcome objectives: A proper planning by describing precisely what students are expected to learn and be able to do on their own well beyond the end of the group task and curriculum unit.

Group to master common skills: Everyone in the group needs to master the common set of information or skills.

Clear and complete set of task –completion directions or instructions: Teachers have to state directions or instructions that describe in clear precise terms exactly what students are to do, in what order, with what materials and when appropriate, what students are to generate as evidence of their mastery of targeted content and skills. These directions are given to students before they engage in their group learning efforts.

Face to face interaction: Students need to arrange themselves so that they are positioned and postured to face each other for direct eye to eye contact and face to face academic conversation.

Positive social interaction behaviors and attitudes: Students should engage in such interactive abilities as leadership, trust building, conflict management, constructive criticism, encouragement compromise, clarifying etc. Teachers may need to describe the expected social interaction behavior and attitudes of students and to assign particular students specific roles to ensure that they consciously work on these behaviors in their groups.

Access to must learn information: Teachers must structure the tasks so that students have access to and comprehend the specific information that they must learn.

Opportunities to complete required information processing task: Each student must complete a number of internal information processing task aligned with target objectives, such as comprehending, translating, making connections, assigning meanings, etc.

Provide sufficient time: Each student and group as a whole should be provided the amount of time needed to learn the targeted information and abilities to the extent expected. Without sufficient time spending, the academic benefits to cooperative learning will be limited.

Conclusion

Cooperative learning promotes increased student achievement, improved attitude and enhanced inter-personal relationship (Johnson, et al, 1980). Cooperative learning promotes the interactive processing of ideas and thus develops students thinking ability. Cooperative learning is overwhelmingly positive and cooperative approaches are appropriate for all curriculum areas. It helps to remove pre- conceived ideas of the students and to expand their own thinking by considering different points of view (Samuel 2010). Skills like independent analysis and collaborative problem solving, developed by cooperative learning are highly valued in the global job market. If we use the principles of "Cooperative Learning" and the "Values of Cooperation" –empowering teachers and students, valuing cooperation as both process and content and affirming interpersonal relationships-we can create schools that are truly cooperative and society in which people really do work together for shared, equitable goals which are cherished by all democratic and welfare societies.

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