

Religious Education in the primary school classroom and Cooperative Learning

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Purpose of Cooperative Learning

Co-operative learning is a teaching strategy that allows children to work within groups, learning from and with each other. The task is structured in such a way that involvement of each group member contributes to the completion of the task. Success is based on the performance of the team - all members must contribute, take responsibility and be accountable to the group and their own learning. Through the layout of heterogeneous groups, the students come to understand, value and respect diversity, which contributes to the success of the team (Kagan, 1992, p.23). Johnson and Johnson (1997, p.23) believe there is a positive interdependence among the students' attainment of goals; students perceive that they can reach their learning goals only if the other students in the learning group also reach their goal.

The implementation of co-operative learning strategies allows students to learn concepts and academic skills while at the same time mastering co-operation skills. Through working in small groups of three to five students, children are given the opportunity to learn from and with each other in a supportive environment, with joint responsibility to share, while practising and monitoring their own skills. **The teacher's role becomes one of resource, observer, interactor, and responder, rather than just that of an expert.**

Dewey, Lewin, Mead, Sullivan and Deutch, leading psychologists (Johnson and Johnson, 1997, p.146) believed in the importance of teaching young children social skills, to be utilised and enhanced for success in later life. The focus emphasis of teachers should be teaching the students appropriate social behaviours and academic survival skills (Rogers, 1995, p.32). Co-operative learning strategies provide such an arena for social skills to be mastered. As learning is predominantly experiential, the more opportunities the children have in experiencing working together, the more they are likely to succeed in their academic and social life. Kagan claims traditional classroom

organisation is characterised by competitive or individualised social organisation; **co-operative learning refers to a set of instructional strategies that include co-operation, and student-to-student interaction over subject matter, as an integral part of the learning process (1992, p.24).**

This article is Part II of a paper on Co-operative Learning in Primary School Religious Education, Part I of which was published in the May edition of Catholic School Studies (Page 31). Part I set the theoretical and theological background and this section outlines the purpose of using such a strategy. Part III will be published in the May edition 2003.

Co-operative learning strategies give students the ability to work together to maximise their own, and each other's learning. It is a teaching strategy where the learner becomes active and achieves greater responsibility for their own learning outcomes. Oral language is developed through exchanging ideas and opinions, problem solving, planning and reporting information to others. Co-operative learning experiences develop students' social skills of listening and speaking through the interaction with their peers. The co-operative classroom provides students the opportunity to develop leadership, self-confidence, self-esteem and responsibility, and to learn academic content more quickly (McCabe & Rhoades, 1988, p.5).

Principles of Cooperative Learning

Principles of co-operative learning involve face-to-face heterogeneous learning teams where the learning is active, not passive, and oral summation is promoted. Positive interdependence is encouraged as the children develop a sense of the "we, rather than me" mentality. Personal accountability is fostered as the children must work for the benefit of the group and contribute. Training in interpersonal skills is explicit as the children work together effectively and positively.

Johnson and Johnson (1989) describe five principles of co-operative learning: positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, person and group accountability, appropriate uses of social skills, and group processing (p.16).

Positive interdependence exists when students know that they are linked with each other in a way so that they cannot succeed unless they do

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their part and co-ordinate their efforts to complete a task. The use of co-operative groups begins with structured positive interdependence. Group members have to know that they "sink or swim" together, in which they have two responsibilities: to maximise their own productivity and to maximise the productivity of all other group members.

Personal accountability exists when there is a sense of personal responsibility for contributing their own effort to accomplish the group's goals. **This involves being responsible for completing their own share of the work and facilitating the work of other group members.**

Face-to-face interaction is defined as persons encouraging and facilitating each other's efforts to complete tasks and achieve in order to reach the group's goals. **Students provide each other with help and assistance, exchange resources, provide feedback and act in trusting and trustworthy ways.**

Social Skills must be taught to the students for co-operative learning to be successful. Small group skills need to begin with allowing the students to get to know and trust each other, allowing them to communicate their ideas accurately, accept and support each other and resolve conflicts constructively.

Group processing is understood to give the students strategies to work together cohesively as well as enabling them to reflect in a group session on actions that were helpful and decisions that need to be changed. The purpose of group processing is to clarify and improve the effectiveness of the members in contributing to the joint efforts to achieve the group's goals (Johnson and Johnson, 1989).

Teacher's Role

There is less direct teaching in co-operative classrooms than in traditional ones, and the teacher is seen as the task setter, classroom manager and synthesiser (Bruffee, 1973, p.635). Teachers help students decide on their task and how to attack the task, and they assume managerial duties while helping the whole class to analyse and synthesise the information when each group reports back. As task setter, manager, and synthesiser, the teacher engages in a process of creating conditions in which co-operative learning can occur. **Teachers are seen as guides and facilitators rather than the source of all knowledge and direction.** The teacher introduces the lesson, assigns students to groups, gives students the materials they need to complete the assignment, and assigns student roles. While the students work together, the teacher moves from group to group systematically monitoring their interaction. The teacher intervenes when students do not understand the task or when there are problems in working together. After the completion of the assignment, the group processes how well they functioned as a team. **In working co-operatively, students realise they are mutually responsible for each other's learning and have a stake in each other's success.**

Enhancement of learning using co-operative strategies

The effectiveness of co-operative learning strategies used within the classroom has been documented through hundreds of research studies (Holt, 1993, p.1). The conclusion that co-operative learning promotes higher achievement than competitive and individualistic learning structures, across all age levels, subjects and tasks, is based upon a number of major reviews of Johnson and Johnson (1989, p.24). **Their research over the past ten years demonstrates superior outcomes for co-operative learning and achievement gains for all students involved.** They maintain that the implementation of co-operative strategies within the classroom increases students' achievement, higher-level reasoning, social skills, self-esteem and social support. Interpersonal relationships are improved, as is a fondness for school and the curriculum. There is a positive change in social values and behaviours as well. Through the immersion into a caring and supportive atmosphere, greater productivity results, which in turn affects social competence. In co-operative learning groups, members promote each other's success by giving and receiving assistance; exchanging resources and information; giving and receiving feedback on task work and teamwork behaviour; challenging each other; reasoning; advocating increased efforts to achieve; mutually influencing each others reasoning and behaviour; and engaging in the interpersonal and small group skills needed for effective teamwork. The group also reflects upon their effectiveness and how their interpersonal skills can be continuously improved.

Skills of co-operation are best taught by methods of modelling on the part of the teacher and by peers (Argyle, 1991, p.21). Role modelling, defined as learning by imitation, has been shown to be an effective teaching method for children (McGuinnis & Goldstein, 1990, p.9). **Co-operative learning fosters positive self-esteem and takes into account difficulties and a different range of abilities of the students.** The students are allowed to develop positive attention from others and accept and understand differences in learners, while taking responsibility for their own learning styles. A sense of motivation increases within co-operative learning activities as group members stick together with a sense of "we-ness," not "one-ness." This cohesiveness binds the groups and allows the children to learn at a greater rate.

Within co-operative classrooms, interaction with peers produces cognitive development and social complexity. Positive feelings are fostered, loneliness and feelings of isolation are reduced, while self-esteem increases as others begin to show respect and care for the person. **Children learn from training to increase their ability to work together.** Students are given the opportunity to work with and to tutor others and share rewards. This feeling of shared responsibility creates positive feelings and a positive self-image.