

COOPERATIVE LEARNING:

HOW LEARNERS WORK TOGETHER AND SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER FOR MUTUAL BENEFIT

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SUMMARY: *No matter what you do as a teacher to motivate learners to work harder, many just don't care. It's worse when they have already failed a phase; they know that they will be progressed to the next class without any effort on their part* (Teacher, School MI-Quintile 4). When confronted with similar challenges, teachers in schools that work turn to *cooperative learning* for a solution.

Cooperative learning has five essential pillars or elements:

☞ **Positive interdependence:** Exists when group members realise that one cannot succeed unless everyone succeeds

☞ **Individual accountability:** exists when all group members are held accountable for achieving the goals of the group

☞ **Promotive interaction:** occurs when group members help, support, encourage, and praise each other's efforts to learn

☞ **Interpersonal skills:** Learners are required to learn the interpersonal required to function as part of a group (i.e. teamwork)

☞ **Group processing:** Exists when group members discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships

that confront many teachers in today's classrooms.

When confronted with the same challenges, teachers in schools that work¹ turn to *cooperative learning* for a solution.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING

What is cooperative learning?

Cooperative learning is defined as instructional use of small groups so that learners work together to maximize their own and each other's learning.

In cooperative learning, learners work together in groups to achieve three main goals, i.e. to:

- ▣ contribute to a team
- ▣ demonstrate individual responsibility
- ▣ share accountability for the outcomes of the group

Benefits of cooperative learning

Cooperative learning can:

- ▣ impact academic achievement in a positive way
- ▣ increase learners' self-esteem because learners realise that they are important to a group's success

INTRODUCTION

What do you do when learners in your class are not motivated to do anything; when they just seem not to care; when, no matter what you or say, they remain indifferent and they fail every assessment? These are questions

¹ In April 2017, the Minister of Basic Education commissioned the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) to conduct the *Schools that Work II* study. This study sought to examine the characteristics of top-performing schools in South Africa. The best practices discussed in this advocacy brief are based on the findings of that study. The full report is available on the Department of Basic Education website: www.education.gov.za/Resources/Reports.aspx NEEDU can be reached at (012) 357 4231



- cb improve their social skills by teaching learners how to communicate or work through conflict situations
- cb increase higher-level thinking because, as they talk with others in their group, learners hear differing thoughts and opinions
- cb allow for more learners to be actively involved in a lesson because each learner must contribute in order for his or her group to be successful

When describing the benefits of cooperative learning one teacher notes:

No matter what you do as a teacher to motivate learners to work harder, many just don't care. It's worse when they have already failed a phase; they know that they will be progressed to the next class without any effort on their part. But if they know that they would be letting their group members down if they don't pull up their sleeves, pressure from the team members makes a big difference. (Teacher, School MI-Quintile 4)

Pillars of cooperative learning

In their model of cooperative learning Johnson, Johnson and Smith, experts in cooperative learning, identified five essential elements or pillars of cooperative learning. They are:

-  Positive interdependence
-  Individual accountability
-  Promotive interaction
-  Interpersonal skills
-  Group processing

The extent to which high-performing schools use cooperative learning is consistent with research- or empirically-tested pillars of cooperative learning. Each pillar is briefly discussed below.

Positive interdependence



Positive interdependence exists when group members realise that they are linked with each other in a way that:

- cb one cannot succeed unless everyone succeeds
- cb if one fails, all fail
- cb they “sink or swim together”
- cb each learner's efforts benefit not only him- or herself, but all other group members as well

Positive interdependence creates a commitment to other people's success as well as one's own and is the heart of cooperative learning.

Teachers use different strategies to encourage learners in their cooperative groups to learn from each other. Amongst other things, they:

- cb Assign work to be done in cooperative groups
- cb Give each member of the cooperative group opportunities to teach a skill or a concept they understood better than others to their peers
- cb Give learners a problem-solving assignment, an investigation or a project to be accomplished by a cooperative group and requiring it to produce a group product, solution or a consensus answer
- cb Assign the same marks or points for any piece of work completed by each cooperative group
- cb Assign a task to a cooperative group that must be done sequentially where one group member must first complete his or her task before the next task could be completed by another group member
- cb Give learners in their cooperative groups past exam papers and require them to answer different questions as a group

Individual accountability



Individual accountability exists when all group members are held accountable for :

- cb achieving the goals of the group
- cb contributing his or her share of the work to ensure that no one “hitch-hikes” on the work of others

Individual accountability also exists when the performance of each individual learner is assessed and the results are given back to the group and the individual in order to ascertain who needs more assistance, support, and encouragement in completing the assignment



Teachers hold individual learners in a cooperative group accountable for their performance by assessing learners and assigning marks for the whole (i.e. a group average).

Assertions from learners suggest stronger effects of individual accountability exerted by collaborative groups than that exerted by teachers. One learner reports as follows:

We motivate each other but we also put pressure on each other as learners to do well at school. We have our future to prepare for. The road does not end here. We have a life ahead of us that we must prepare for. (Learner, **School LE**-Quintile 4)



Promotive interaction



Promotive interaction occurs when group members help, support, encourage, and praise each other's efforts to learn.

Cooperative learning groups provide the following support systems:

- ▣ an academic support system
- ▣ a personal support system

There are important cognitive activities and interpersonal dynamics that occur when learners promote each other's learning.

In schools that work, promotive interaction is about:

- ▣ Teachers encouraging learners to promote each other's learning because:

When learners work individually, they compete and excel as individuals. Often the competition is not a healthy one. It causes rivalry among learners but when learners understand that they don't have to compete in order to get good marks and see the value of supporting each other, they perform even better. Their fellow learners also perform well and so does the whole school. (Teacher, **School WG**-Quintile 5)

- ▣ Learners working together and promote each other's success by helping, supporting, encouraging, and applauding each other's efforts to learn and achieve:

When there is no teacher in class, we choose a learner who is good in a subject to go in front and teach us a topic that most of us are struggling with. In other schools, if there is no teacher in class, all hell breaks loose. (Learner, **School GO**-Quintile 3)



Interpersonal skills



Learners are required to learn not only academic subject matter (taskwork) but they are also required to learn the interpersonal and small group skills required to function as part of a group (teamwork).

Group members must develop different skills, including leadership, trust-building, conflict-management, decision-making and communication.

Teachers in schools that work:

- ▣ Build learner ownership by promoting self-efficacy and scaffold learning of both academic and social behaviours to guide learners in assuming ownership and responsibility for their own learning
- ▣ Teach teamwork skills and conflict-management just as purposefully and precisely as they do academic skills. They feel this is important because, as one teacher observes:

You can throw learners into groups but if they don't know how to behave in their discussions, nothing will come out of those discussions. You will simply be wasting your and the learners' time. If you want to reap the benefits of learners working as teams, start by teaching them how to work in a team. (Teacher, **School KN**-Quintile 4)



Group processing



Group processing exists when group members discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships. Two most important features of group processing are:

- ▣ Groups examine members' actions to identify those that are helpful and those that are not and make decisions about what behaviours to maintain or change.
- ▣ Continuous improvement of the process of learning results from the careful analysis of how members are working together.

To assess how effectively learner groupings are functioning, achieving their goals and maintaining effective working, teachers in top-performing schools:

- ▣ Use the analysis of continuous assessment (formal or informal) to evaluate how well individual learners in a cooperative group



perform and whether a cooperative group has achieved its goals:

Every Friday learners write a test. We set a short test of about 15 marks on the topic they were working on just to see how learners perform. When learner performance improves, then we know that the cooperative group is successful. (Teacher, School KF-Quintile 4)

- cb Check randomly, e.g. randomly calling on specific learners to give an explanation after talking about the question or problem in a group:

I monitor what groups are doing. I don't wait until I give a test to see if there is improvement in learner performance. After a group has worked on a topic that was assigned to them, I call different learners at random and ask them few questions to see if they understand what they were discussing. (Teacher, School EG-Quintile 3)

- cb Ask individual learners to demonstrate a skill (e.g., to demonstrate competency with specific experimental skills in a laboratory) that a cooperative group was assigned to practise:

You need to continuously assess whether peer support in groups is working; otherwise how do you know if these groups are making a difference or causing more damage. On what basis do you decide to let a group to continue working together or dismantle it because it is not paying any dividends? (Teacher, School KK-Quintile 4)

How to set-up cooperative groups

- cb **Nature of groupings:** Most top-performing schools prefer heterogeneous groups than homogeneous groups because they strongly believe that different learners have more to learn from each other.
- cb **Size of groupings:** Cooperative groups are especially effective in teams of four to five members.
- cb **Ground rules that guide group members:** Following are six simple rules that guide cooperative group members:

 Share	 Contribute	 Stay on task
Help each other	Encourage each other	Give & accept feedback

PEER-TUTORING SYSTEM

Most schools that use work peer-tutoring system (also called “kids teaching kids”) instead of cooperative leaning. The two approaches, while complementary, are not synonymous. Where in cooperative leaning the focus is on learners working together in small groups to maximize their own and each other's learning, in peer-tutoring system, a mentor (an academically strong learner) helps a mentee (a weaker learner).

Forms of mentor-mentee relationships

Different schools that work use one or more forms of peer-tutoring systems. These include the following:

- cb **Older learner-younger learner peer support** (cross age/grade support): An older learner, for example, in a senior grade (often Grade 12) mentors a younger learner or a group of learners in the lower grades (Grade 8 to 11) in a structured environment sanctioned by teachers.
- cb **Academically stronger learner-weaker learner peer support** (heterogeneous peer support). “The brighter learner sits with a group of weaker learners and helps them.” (Teacher, School KM-Quintile 4)
- cb **Academically strong learner-academically strong learner peer support** (homogeneous peer support): High-performing learners work together cooperatively for mutual benefit.

How to set-up a peer-tutoring system

When setting up peer tutoring systems, schools that work:

- cb Define roles and responsibilities of mentors and mentees
- cb Train peer-mentors to decrease the likelihood of mentors engaging in negative behaviour or causing harm to mentees, whether intentionally or not
- cb Recruit mentors from learner populations within the schools with good academic achievement and/or former learners (alumni)
- cb Recruit mentees, i.e., low-performing or struggling learners and progressed learners
- cb Match mentors and mentees by assigning high-performing learners to struggling learners

