



COOPERATIVE LEARNING – AN EFFECTIVE METHOD FOR DEVELOPING COMPETENCIES IN PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract: *Cooperative learning offers students the opportunity to learn together, communicate, and support one another in completing tasks. This study is based on activities conducted in a preparatory class of 17 students—three of whom have special educational needs—and examines how group work contributes to the development of the students' competencies.*

During a small-group activity, the children's participation, communication, collaboration, assumption of responsibilities, and support for their peers were monitored. The observations highlighted more active student engagement, opportunities for interaction and collaboration, and the possibility for students with special educational needs to participate in completing shared tasks.

Cooperative activities, adapted to children's ages and needs, can contribute to the development of communication, collaboration, and interpersonal skills, and can foster a learning environment in which every student has the opportunity to get involved.

Keywords: *cooperative learning, preparatory class, competencies, inclusion, special educational needs.*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the term „cooperation” has been used increasingly often alongside „collaboration”, in the political and economic spheres as well as in education. At first glance, the two concepts appear to have similar meanings; however, closer analysis reveals certain differences between them. In the field of education, this distinction is significant, particularly when discussing cooperative learning. For this approach to be implemented effectively, those involved in the teaching process must understand how roles are assigned, the nature of the relationships between participants, and the working methods employed. (Handrabura, L., 2003, p.51)



Cooperative learning involves students working together to complete a task or achieve a common goal. During these activities, children can share their ideas, listen to their classmates, and help one another. In this way, they not only learn new things but also learn how to communicate, collaborate, and be considerate of those around them.

In the preparatory class, cooperative learning can easily be implemented, as the children are at the beginning of their school life and are still learning how to work together. At this age, they gradually develop skills such as following rules, taking turns, sharing materials, and listening to their classmates. Working in small groups gives them the opportunity to practice these skills in concrete and enjoyable learning situations.

Through age-appropriate activities, children can learn to work together, take on various tasks, and help one another when needed. Group activities are also beneficial for students who require extra support, as they provide an opportunity to participate alongside their classmates and get involved in completing shared tasks.

Building on these ideas, the paper examines how cooperative learning can be implemented in the preparatory class and how students engage in group activities. The study was conducted with a preparatory class of 17 students, including three with special educational needs.

MAIN TEXT

Cooperative learning helps students learn together and support one another during activities. By working in small groups, children can share ideas, help each other, and find solutions to assigned tasks together. Each child has a role within the group and contributes, in their own way, to completing the task. (Lungu-Tranole, C., 2014, p.270)

Implementing cooperative learning in the classroom requires teachers to be prepared and familiar with the ways this method can be used in their teaching practice. (Petre, G., E., 2022, p.235) In cooperative learning, the teacher plays a different role compared to traditional lessons. They organize the activity, set the tasks, and monitor how the students work together. During the activity, the teacher provides guidance and intervenes when necessary, without taking over the task for them. In this way, the teacher helps children become more engaged and responsible for their own learning.

In cooperative activities, students work together to achieve a shared outcome. Each child plays a role in completing the task, and peer support helps them participate and learn from one another. Thus, the group's activity is important both for each individual student and for the completion of the shared task.

In such an activity, the emphasis is not on competition or on a single student achieving the best result. Collaboration, communication, helping classmates, and each child's involvement in the group's activity are more important. (Temple, C., Steele, J. L, Meredith K. S., 2002, p. 5)

Cooperative learning can be employed in various school settings and involves the use of methods and activities that encourage students to work together. In lower-grade classes, these activities must be adapted to the children's age and level of understanding so that every student can participate.

For group work to proceed smoothly, it is important for students to learn to respect one another, accept their classmates' ideas, and take their opinions into account. Children should also be encouraged to evaluate their own work, accept help from others, and offer support when needed. In this way, students discover that they can learn not only from the teacher but also from each other.

Depending on the duration of their use and how they are organized, cooperative groups can be of three types: formal, informal, and base.



Formal cooperative groups are established to accomplish a shared task or objective. They can be utilized during a specific activity, a single lesson, or over a longer period. Within the group, students work together and share tasks to achieve the intended outcome.

Informal cooperative groups are formed for a short duration, ranging from a few minutes to the length of a single activity. They can be used for discussions, completing a task, or collaboratively finding a solution. This type of group is well-suited for the preparatory class, as short activities help children maintain their attention and interest.

Basic cooperative groups are stable groups whose members work together over an extended period. The children get to know one another, help each other, and offer support during activities. Over time, this way of working can foster better relationships among classmates and develop a spirit of cooperation.

As part of cooperative activities, the teacher is responsible for setting objectives and organizing the students' workflow. The size of the groups is determined by the assigned task, the children's age, and their experience with cooperative activities. Additionally, the teacher may decide whether to use formal, informal, or base groups, depending on the purpose of the activity.

Group formation is an important aspect. Groups can be composed of students with varying levels of proficiency, allowing children to help and learn from one another. For preparatory-year students, small groups are easier to organize and monitor.

The number of members must be chosen carefully. Groups that are too large can make it difficult to involve all the children, and in some situations, subgroups may form where only a few students actually work on the task. In small groups, the teacher can more easily monitor each child's participation and intervene when a student needs support.

Cooperative learning has several important characteristics that facilitate the smooth conduct of group activities: (Mara, E. L., 2020 pp. 256-257)

- positive interdependence entails students understanding that the group's outcome depends on each member's contribution. To complete the task, children must work together, share materials, and help one another. This collaboration can be fostered by establishing a shared goal, sharing information, or assigning simple roles within the group.

- personal responsibility refers to each student's involvement in the group's activity. Each child must make an individual contribution and complete their assigned task. In this way, the group's success depends not just on one or two students, but on the participation of everyone.

- direct interaction is important because students need the opportunity to communicate and work together. Small groups are well-suited for this type of activity, as each child has a better chance to express their ideas, listen, and receive help from peers.

- interpersonal and teamwork skills develop gradually. Children learn to communicate, listen, make decisions together, express their opinions, and resolve disagreements. In the preparatory class, these skills can be practiced through simple tasks and clear working rules.

- reflecting on the group's activity involves discussing how the work was carried out. At the end, students can share what they enjoyed, what they managed to accomplish together, and what could be improved next time. The teacher can observe the groups' activities and offer guidance to enhance collaboration.

Cooperative learning can have positive effects on student engagement and on the way students interact and learn together; however, implementing this method may also present certain challenges. The advantages and limitations that may arise during cooperative activities are summarized in the following table.



Table 1. Advantages and limitations of cooperative learning

Advantages	Limitations and challenges
Students participate more actively in learning activities	Tasks may be unevenly distributed among group members
Group activities can be more engaging and enjoyable for children	Some students may be less involved in completing the task
Allows for the participation of all students, including those who need more time to learn	The activity can become disorganized if rules are not clearly established
Students have the opportunity to get to know their peers better and work together	Noise levels may rise, and some children may talk more than others
Children feel freer to express their ideas and opinions	Overuse or excessively long sessions can reduce the activity's effectiveness
Students learn to take responsibility for their own contributions	Less content may be covered within a given timeframe during group activities
Cooperative activities can foster self-confidence and autonomy	Some errors may go unnoticed if the teacher does not monitor group activities
Working together can increase student interest in the topic	Assessing each student's individual contribution can be more difficult
Students can learn from one another by exchanging ideas and experiences	Organizing a cooperative activity requires careful preparation by the teacher

(Source: Adapted from Geoffrey Petty, 2013)

The points raised highlight that cooperative learning can yield significant benefits in teaching, yet it also requires careful organization to avoid potential difficulties. Against this backdrop, the following section presents a study aimed at observing how the use of cooperative learning activities influences student participation and engagement in the educational process.

The aim of the study is to investigate how the use of cooperative learning can foster the active participation of preparatory-year pupils and the development of communication, collaboration, and interpersonal skills.

To achieve the proposed goal, the following objectives were established:

- observing the level of student engagement in group activities;
- identifying the ways in which students communicate and collaborate to complete a shared task;
- monitoring how students assume responsibilities within the group;
- observing behaviors involving mutual support and assistance;
- identifying the ways in which students with special educational needs participate in cooperative activities;
- highlighting the difficulties encountered in organizing and conducting group activities.

The study was conducted in a preparatory class of 17 pupils, including three with special educational needs. The research activity took place within the framework of the regular instructional program, without altering the general conditions under which school activities are conducted.

To carry out the cooperative activity, the students were organized into four working groups, ensuring that each group consisted of a small number of members. Organizing the students into small groups aimed to facilitate direct communication and create conditions conducive to the participation of every student.

The method of systematic observation was used to conduct the study, enabling the monitoring of behaviors exhibited by students during the cooperative activity.

The observation focused on several aspects of student participation: engagement in completing the task, expressing ideas, listening to peers, adhering to working rules, assuming responsibilities, offering and seeking support, and contributing to the completion of the shared task.



The data were recorded using an observation sheet developed in relation to the study's objectives.

The activity was titled „Building a Story Together.” Each group received a set of images depicting characters, places, and actions. The group's task was to select the images, arrange them in order, and construct a story. Each student was assigned a specific responsibility, ensuring that the creation of the final product involved the contribution of all members.

During the activity, the teacher did not directly provide the solution but instead observed how the students collaborated, intervened when difficulties arose, and asked questions to help the children find solutions on their own. At the end, each group presented the product they had created.

During the activity, the participation of the three students with special educational needs was monitored based on their engagement with the task and the level of support required. They were assigned accessible tasks tailored to their individual capabilities and received support from both the teacher and their peers. Observations indicated that small-group organization fostered opportunities for participation and interaction, with each student contributing to the completion of the shared task according to their own abilities.

Table 2. Results

No.	Aspect monitored	Indicator	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently
1.	Participation	Gets involved in carrying out the group task	2	4	11
2.	Communication	Expresses ideas and proposals	3	5	9
3.	Listening	Listens to and considers colleagues' ideas	3	6	8
4.	Responsibility	Fulfills assigned role/task	3	5	9
5.	Cooperation	Collaborates with others to complete the task	2	4	11
6.	Mutual support	Offers help to colleagues when needed	4	5	8
7.	Seeking support	Asks for help when encountering difficulties	2	6	9
8.	Adherence to rules	Follows the rules established for the group activity	2	5	10
9.	Task completion	Contributes to the group's final output	2	4	11
10.	Inclusion	Participates in the activity and accepts the involvement of colleagues with diverse needs	3	5	9

Analysis of the data obtained through observation highlights varying levels of the behaviors monitored during the cooperative activity. Of the 17 participating students, 11 (64,7%) frequently demonstrated engagement in completing the group task, while 9 (52,9%) frequently expressed their own ideas.

Regarding the ability to listen to and consider colleagues' ideas, this behavior was frequently observed in 8 students (47,1%), while the other students displayed it with varying frequency. The result indicates that active listening and respect for others' opinions are behaviors requiring practice and reinforcement at the preparatory class level.

Cooperation in accomplishing the shared task was frequently observed among 11 students (64,7%). Regarding support offered to peers, 8 students (47,1%) frequently demonstrated this behavior. A contribution to the creation of the final product was frequently noted in the case of 11 students (64,7%), highlighting the involvement of a significant proportion of the group in achieving the common goal.

Overall, the results indicate active participation by the majority of students and a developing ability to collaborate on a shared task. At the same time, the differences observed among the



indicators suggest a need to continue cooperative activities, with an emphasis on listening to peers, offering support, and respecting each group member's contribution.

CONCLUSION

The activities conducted demonstrated that cooperative learning offers preparatory-year students favorable contexts for participation, communication, and collaboration. Working in small groups enables children to express their ideas, take on responsibilities, and support one another in completing a shared task.

The observations revealed both established cooperative behaviors and areas requiring further practice, such as listening to peers, adhering to roles, and offering support. For students with special educational needs, the adaptation of tasks and group support facilitated their engagement in the activity.

Therefore, the use of cooperative activities in the preparatory class can provide a valuable context for the gradual development of communication, collaboration, and interpersonal skills, provided there is careful organization and consistent involvement on the part of the teacher.

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