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Connecting Social Skills and Cooperative Learning

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Connecting Social Skills and Cooperative Learning

by

Danielle Mercendetti

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A thesis submitted to the

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Chapter I

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

When students enter school, there is often an underlying assumption that they are able to interact with their peers in a cooperative way. It is commonly thought that students are able to cooperate, communicate, problem solve and work together successfully with their peers within a group. Frequently, educators believe that students know how to interact appropriately in order to meet their needs; that they know how to ask for clarification when confused, how to take turns, how to explain their thinking and listen when others are speaking. Then, towards the end of their educational experience, they leave with the expectation of being able to function and contribute in today's society in an effective way. While this is the desired outcome, the fact remains that not all students come and go with the necessary skill sets for them to be effective participants in today's society.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to investigate how social skills contribute to successful cooperative learning within the classroom. I looked at how incorporating and teaching social skills in classroom lessons affects student's

1
interaction and behaviors while working in cooperative groups. I looked at student perceptions of social interaction within cooperative group work, if students apply the learned social skills within cooperative groups and if the teaching of the social skills helped increase social interaction within cooperative learning groups.

Some studies show large numbers of children and young adults do not possess the skills needed to establish and maintain positive relationships with their peers. Social skills are skills necessary in all aspects of life. When you talk, play, interact, and work with others, these skills are the connections among people (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1991).

Vygotsky’s social development theory suggests that social interaction is critical in the development of cognition. He states that higher functioning originates between individuals. When children are able to interact with their peers, they exchange information and insights, correct one another, and adjust their understanding on the basis of others’ understanding as well (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1998). This indicates that children value and learn from others and their surroundings. Vygotsky’s theory describes social skills as being essential to helping students work and interact effectively with peers (Vygotsky 1962).
Background of the Problem

According to research by Johnson and Johnson (1998), due to changes in the structure of family, neighborhood, and community life, many students are no longer taught how to interact effectively with others by their parents and peers. Lickona conducted a study in 1991 that documented the erosion of values such as honesty, respect and caring among today’s youth. Lack of social skills is evident through student interaction during cooperative group work. This decline is calling for schools and educators to address this breakdown and include these skills within the curriculum. Social skills are not only important in all areas of the classroom but they are lifelong skills that are necessary for students to have for their future careers. Having emphasis placed on these skills within the daily setting of school activities will only increase future success in today’s society.

The term cooperative learning is heard within school buildings, however, it needs to be taken seriously and used appropriately. Cooperative learning is a strategy that is used to maximize student achievement in schools; however, oftentimes it goes without being used to its fullest potential or is used in an unsuccessful way (Johnson, Johnson and Holubec, 1998). When proper teaching of social skills is missing in the classroom, group members can sometimes lack the social skills necessary for appropriate interaction and cooperative groups are then ineffective. This can occasionally lead to conflict, miscommunication, or one
student doing all of the work. According to Johnson and Johnson, “simply placing students in groups and telling them to work together does not produce cooperation and certainly not the higher achievement and positive social outcomes that can result from cooperative learning groups” (1990, p. 29).

In addition to the lack of social skills, some educators assume students possess these skills, or if they are taught one time that they do not have to teach them again. Educators often hold a variety of misconceptions about cooperative group work because they often lack the proper knowledge and understanding of cooperative learning, and as a result, they shy away from using it in the classroom. An intervention study conducted by Koutselini found that teachers had negative attitudes toward cooperative learning and considered it time-consuming, with no added value to student learning. She also discovered that teachers did not understand that cooperative learning and simple group work had significant differences. Koutselini’s intervention study helped uncover and change educators’ misconceptions who went through her program. With appropriate training and planning, teachers will better understand the benefits and advantages of cooperative group work and successful implementation of the five elements in which cooperative learning is based. According to Johnson and Johnson the five elements of cooperative learning are:
1. Positive interdependence: students work toward a common goal. They fail or succeed together as a whole group.
2. Individual accountability: each student in the group is assessed individually. Students learn together so they perform higher individually.
3. Face-to-face promotive interaction: students promote each other’s learning by assisting, supporting, encouraging and praising each other’s efforts to achieve.
4. Social skills: interpersonal and small group skills such as leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication and conflict-management, need to be taught.
5. Group processing: group members discuss effectiveness of group. What went well, what needs improvement and how well they maintained an effective working relationship (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, p. 71).

Significance of the problem

With cooperation and social interaction playing such a critical role in the success of individuals, students will benefit tremendously from direct instruction around social skills. When students have difficulty with communication and problem solving, giving them tools and strategies to use in these situations will help ensure greater success in all future, real world situations.

I teach in a sixth grade, suburban setting in upstate New York. Students are frequently asked to work with their peers on assignments. They are asked to problem solve, explain and share their thought processes and request help when confused. When students lack the necessary strategies to communicate
effectively, learning can suffer. Students benefit from social interaction with peers and as a result maximize learning for all.

Rationale

I believe that student learning will be maximized through the teaching of social skills in the classroom. Students will feel safe and confident in sharing their thoughts and asking for help when necessary. They will be better equipped with social skills that will help them interact appropriately and successfully with others in all situations. This action research helped explore student perceptions and views on social interaction during cooperative group work. It also helped me gain a better understanding of where social interaction breakdown may occur within a group. This led to my teaching of social skills within the classroom and helped improve student interaction and cooperation within cooperative group work.
The following chapter provides the theoretical research and practical findings of social skills within cooperative learning groups. The review of literature includes other studies and researchers' conclusions based on their findings.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

In today’s society, there are increasingly large numbers of children, adolescents and young adults who do not possess the social skills necessary to establish and maintain positive relationships with their peers. There are roadblocks that prevent these relationships and interactions from happening. Due to changes in the makeup of family, neighborhood and community life, students are no longer taught how to interact effectively with others. Social skills are the connection among people and without them, social problems will persist without help from schools (Johnson and Johnson, 1998).

Due to the number of social problems today, schools need to become more involved in teaching social skills to students and providing professional development to teachers in order to teach social skills effectively. However, teacher misconceptions and lack of training prevent proper implementation of successful cooperative learning and teaching of social skills within the classroom (Johnson, Johnson and Holubec, 1998). The teaching of social skills is not only important in creating a successful cooperative learning environment in school, but they are a necessity to all aspects of life. In our democratic society, citizens are expected to behave responsibly, respect diversities, accept what is fair and
show concern for the common good by helping others (Hsuan, Huang, Lee, Richardson, and Tolson, 2009). Providing students with social skills will improve interaction and promote their success in today’s world.

Theoretical Framework-Social Interaction

Student interaction can be a powerful teaching strategy in the classroom for students to learn. This interaction emphasizes the importance of collaboration throughout the learning process, stating that learning is not simply the assimilation and accommodations of new knowledge by learners; but a process by which learners are being integrated into a knowledge community (“Theories of Learning,” n.d.). Post-revolutionary Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky developed social constructivism. Social constructivism emphasizes the collaborative nature in learning. Collaborative learning methods require learners to develop teamwork skills and to see individual learning as essentially related to the success of group learning.

Vygotsky claimed social interaction plays an important role in the development of cognition. His work is based on the foundation that knowledge is social and constructed from cooperative efforts to learn, understand and solve problems. According to Vygotsky, there are two levels of development. First is the level of development that the learner has reached when they are capable of
solving problems on their own. The second level is potential development, the “zone of proximal development”, where the learner is capable of reaching with the guidance of teachers or in collaboration with peers. This is the level at which learning takes place and exceeds what can be attained alone (Vygotsky, 1978).

Cooperative learning is a strategy that has been around for hundreds of years. Francis Parker was one of the leading American advocates of cooperative learning in the last three decades of the 19th Century. He helped lead the way for many later theorists such as Vygotsky. He believed that learning was using what one learned to help others and that students would fully develop their capacities only if cooperative learning was encouraged (Johnson and Johnson, 2009).

According to Johnson et al, cooperation is working together to accomplish common goals. Individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and beneficial to all other group members. Through collaboration and social interactions with peers, students are able to exchange information and insights, correct one another, and adjust and build understanding on the basis of others’ understanding. Students maximize each other’s learning (1998).

Social Skills Programs and Benefits

In order to have cooperation in the classroom, activities must include the five essential elements of cooperative learning. The five elements are as follows;
positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing. Without the teaching of social skills and other necessary components mentioned above, students will not experience the extraordinary achievements that cooperative learning is capable of providing (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). Researchers have advocated the implementation and use of cooperative learning in order to increase student achievement and social skills development (Siegel, 2005).

Dollman, Morgan, Pergler, Russell and Watts, conducted an action research study in 2007 to improve student social skills through the use of cooperative learning, in order to develop a positive classroom environment conducive to learning. The action research project involved approximately 95 students, 95 parents, and 200 teachers. It was the intent of the teacher researchers to improve students’ social skills through the strategies of role-playing, jigsawing, think-pair-share, and graphic organizers.

This study was conducted for twelve consecutive weeks. Weeks one and two consisted of pre-documentation, using five tools created and provided by the researchers. These tools included a school-wide faculty survey, parent survey, teacher survey, teacher observation checklist, and student survey. Weeks three through ten consisted of teaching the importance of social skills and focusing on specific activities incorporating targeted skills. Finally, weeks 11 and
12 involved post-documentation using the tools created and provided by the researchers. These tools included a parent survey, teacher survey, teacher observation checklist, and student survey.

The researchers hoped that improved social skills would create a positive learning environment that would benefit all students. The results of this research showed the researchers felt the need to implement appropriate social skill lessons within their curriculum. Overall, the researchers noted the importance of continuous reinforcement of appropriate social skills within the classroom.

Implementing a social skills program within the classroom has numerous positive outcomes for students which result in greater psychological health such as social competencies and higher self-esteem. Social skills are an important element for cooperative groups. Social science research indicates that life without some amount of social skills is not much of a life at all. The inability to relate to others can lead to loneliness and isolation which can have severe effects such as stunting growth, creating anxiety and depression.

According to Johnson et al, there are six significant outcomes of being socially skilled. The first outcome is personal development and identity. Our identity is created out of relationships with others. When we interact with others, we note their responses to us and learn how to view ourselves as other view us. Those without interpersonal skills have distorted relationships with
others and can develop inaccurate views of themselves. The next outcome of being socially skilled is employability, productivity and career success. Most jobs, including higher-paying, interesting jobs, employ people who can cooperate, lead, cope with complex power, influence issues and help solve problems in working with others. These skills are important to employability. The next outcome is quality of life. Research indicates that for most people, a necessary component for a high quality of life is having some type of satisfying, close, personal, intimate relationship. In addition, physical health is another outcome to being socially skilled. Having positive relationships relates to living longer, recovering from illness faster and experiencing less severe illnesses. A person’s physical health improves when people learn the interpersonal skills necessary to take initiative in relationships and become constructive in the ways they deal with conflict. The next outcome is psychological health. The inability to establish acceptable relationships often leads to anxiety, depression, alienation, helplessness, fear and loneliness. Positive relationships are related to psychological health, lack of psychopathology, reduction of psychological distress, resilience, a coherent and integrated self-identity, high self-esteem, and social competence. The final outcome to being socially skilled is the ability to cope with stress. Positive relationships help people cope with stress by providing caring, information resources and feedback. These relationships
decrease the number of stressful events, reduce anxiety and help one to deal with stress constructively. Discussions with supportive peers help perceive the meaning of stressful events, and regain mastery over their lives (Johnson, Johnson and Holubec, 1998).

The importance of developing these social skills among students is critical. If students do not have proper exposure and teaching of these skills, the next generation could end up with major problems. Lickona (1991) has found erosion of virtues such as honesty, respect and caring among today’s youth and has been calling for schools to focus on fostering character education for the last decade.

A study conducted by Hsuan, Huang, Lee, Richardson, and Tolson (2009) investigated whether or not a social skills program, Connecting With Others, would enable students to develop skills increasing socialization with peers. This program was developed with a grant to support teachers in their instruction of pro-social skills. The curriculum includes 30 lessons divided into six skill areas: Concept of Self and Others, Socialization, Problem Solving/Conflict Resolution, Communication, Sharing and Caring/Empathy.

The participants were third and fourth grade students with behavioral and learning disorders as well as general education students. Twenty-one educators, general education teachers, two speech therapists and one school
counselor, implemented the program after thirty-five hours of appropriate training. Teachers created the skill areas in need of attention based on the result of a 50-item Likert scale students had previously taken. They taught the selected social skills in lessons three times per week for 40 minutes for 16 weeks.

The outcomes indicated growth of students' social skills resulting from instruction of the *Connecting with Others* program. The results also indicated, even with the small sample size of twenty-five, the students did grow in the targeted areas and were able to interact positively with peers.

*Social Skills and School Climate*

"It is difficult to change the nature of a family, neighborhood or city. It is less difficult to change the nature of the school experience," (Johnson and Johnson, 1998). According to Johnson and Johnson, working together as a school community will help improve positive development of our students. Healthy social development includes six elements; the ability to manage interdependence with others, having a balance of trust toward others, the ability to view situations and problems from a variety of perspectives, having a meaningful sense of purpose in life, an integrated and coherent sense of personal identity and a positive process for deriving self-esteem (Johnson and Johnson 1998).
As a school community, positive, healthy development for children needs to be enhanced. According to Johnson and Johnson, positive development of children is built on the three C's: Cooperative Community, Constructive Conflict and Civic Values. The school is a cooperative system that focuses on this work. The Three C’s program is a program has been implemented in a variety of schools in North America and throughout the world. Working cooperatively with peers, resolving conflicts constructively and internalizing values are experiences that students need.

When social skills are embedded within curriculum, it is evident within the climate of a school community. In the article, “Teaching for Character and Community”, Kagan conducted a study finding more than three quarters of students involved in school violence had a grievance with another person. Whether it was harassment or being bullied, they felt their motive for violence was to get revenge or simply end the harassment.

Kagan goes on to say that values instilled in today’s youth determine their future. He also suggests that values are acquired at school and that no other important curriculum exists (2001). Educators must incorporate values and character within the curriculum. The need is clear and almost universal. Educators can address the breakdown of community and morality among
students by making character education a part of the school’s core curriculum (Kagan, 2001).

Cooperative learning has received more attention in recent years because it may serve as a vehicle for improving the social and academic climate for a school. It may also be considered an intervention of use in promoting appropriate behavior and in creating a positive behavioral climate in schools, therefore preventing violence (Miller and Peterson, 2002).

Cooperative learning strategies, which include the teaching of social skills, appear to have positive effects for students as reflected in increased academic achievement and improved social attitudes and behavior. The general principal being that students work together as a team, helps students learn something of value from the cooperative activity. These benefits appear to positively influence the school’s academic and social climate as well (Peterson and Skiba, 2000).

Other curricula such as violence prevention or conflict resolution are very recent in schools. However, this does not mean such programs are ineffective. One successful program is the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program. In a large scale evaluation of the program, a majority of teachers reported less violence and increased student cooperation in their classrooms (Peterson, et al). When students are exposed to such programs as social problem solving, they learn to
identify a greater variety of pro-social responses to conflict situations. Although differing in their emphasis, violence prevention, conflict resolution and social problem solving curricula attempt to increase students' knowledge, improve awareness of feeling and teach new skills that can provide an alternative to violence (Skiba and Peterson, 2000).

There are a number of other programs that many schools implement that include the necessary components of teaching social skills as well. A prevention program designed to stop bullying at the elementary level includes many similar skills. Garrity and Jens claim that equipping the student population with skills needed to change the overall school climate has a strong impact on school violence. They go on to say there are effective methods in handling violence that influence the school climate supporting positive interaction within the school community that reinforces a positive, pro-social climate.

The bully proofing program contains five main components; letting students know that staff will intervene when needed, teaching students to set a caring tone in the school, and making a parent-community connection. The remaining two components focus on the importance of social skills. The forth component gives victims support and a means to increase their social and interpersonal skills. This helps create a school environment that helps students
learn to develop better social skills and utilize assistance when needed. Finally, the last component is taking the bullies need for power and rechanneling it into more pro-social directions. This program focuses on placing power in the hands of the caring majority and encourages them to assertively and positively use pro-social interventions (Garrity and Jens, 1997).

Implementing programs such as the ones mention above, helps to ensure that students become self directed and have inner principles needed to regulate their behavior. These programs help to enhance positive development of children and create a community that is cooperative and beneficial for students.

Perceptions & Misconceptions of Cooperative Learning

Teachers often hold a variety of misconceptions about cooperative learning. When teachers have little experience with cooperative learning, they often view it negatively. In order to implement cooperative learning groups effectively in the classroom, teachers need to understand that not all groups are cooperative. It is more than simply placing students in groups and expecting positive results (Johnson & Johnson, 1998).

There are a variety of groups used in classrooms, but it is up to the teacher to know which type they plan to use and what outcome they expect. One group is the pseudo group. This is a group where students are assigned to work
together, but see little benefit in doing so. They have little interest in working
together and some members may block other achievements and communication.
The traditional group is when members agree to work together, but see little
benefit from it. Their achievements are individually recognized. Some members
benefit, but others may be productive working on their own. Cooperative
groups are groups that have a common purpose. Members maximize their own
success as well as the success of others. Specific characteristics are common
goals, accountability and achievement. Higher performance cooperative groups
are groups that meet all the criteria for cooperative groups and outperform
reasonable expectations (Johnson and Johnson, 1998, as cited in Koutselini, 2009).

Knowing the difference between other group work and cooperative group
work increases the expected outcomes of the teacher and the task given.
Research suggests that cooperative efforts result in higher achievement,
supportive and committed relationships, greater social competence and higher
self-esteem (Koutselini, 2009).

Once teachers have a solid understanding of cooperative groups and what
they consist of, they will observe successful implementation within the
classroom. In order to observe this cooperation, the teaching of social skills must
be present within the classroom. According to Kagan, “When teachers embed
character education in their instruction, the classroom becomes a more caring, respectful and inclusive community” (Kagan, 2001, p.54).

An intervention study conducted by Mary Koutselini, at the University of Cyprus found numerous misconceptions held by teachers. The first part of the study was to uncover misconceptions held by teachers and the second part was to help teachers through simulation of cooperative learning to construct meaning apart from traditional group work. The study found that teachers considered cooperative learning time-consuming without any benefits to student learning. Oftentimes teachers did not understand the difference between traditional group work and cooperative group work. They typically thought that high achieving students and unmotivated students did not like cooperative learning and thought it created discipline problems. In addition, they believed that it did not promote questioning and resulted in learning only for high achieving students.

The findings revealed that once teachers participated in an in-service program and simulation of cooperative learning, their views changed from negative to positive. They admitted their experiences resulted in the following outcomes; a better understanding of the cooperative learning structures, having increased confidence in applying cooperative learning, having a positive impact on classroom climate and higher academic achievement for the majority of the
participants when working in cooperative learning groups rather than in simple
group work (Koutselini, 2009).

Teachers do not stress the importance of social skills within the classroom. They frequently assume students’ possess the skills necessary for success within group work. However, if group members lack the interpersonal and small-group skills needed to cooperate effectively, cooperative groups will not be productive (Johnson & Johnson, 1998).

Students need to learn how to communicate effectively with their peers for maximum academic success. They do not know instinctively how to interact effectively with others. Social skills must be integrated and taught appropriately in daily lessons. Students need to know what is expected in order to work productively and they need to share their knowledge in the group in order for the group to be successful. They need to know what the skill of listening looks like and sounds like. They may not be aware of the skill until the need for the skill is established within the classroom, defined and then finally taught (Johnson, et al).

Social skills are not skills that are taught one time and mastered. They often need to be reviewed and revisited throughout the year. Teachers assume students have this knowledge when they enter the classroom and put students in
groups without any teaching around these necessary skills. For maximum success, teachers need to ensure these skills are well integrated within lessons throughout the school year (Johnson, et al).

Some studies indicate that students view group work as a time to get the task done quickly by dividing the task into individual parts. Authors, Koh, Wang, Tan, Liu, and Ee, conducted a study looking at student perceptions of group work. They gathered students’ views on “project work” and if it satisfied their basic psychological needs, affected their motivation, or created opportunities for life skills development.

Students were able to recognize the benefits of working in groups and the areas in need of improvement. They also found that most students do enjoy certain aspect of project work or found it interesting. Students reported they enjoyed working with other. They also felt it contributed positively to their social and personal development by enabling interaction among group members, especially in terms of problem solving, collaboration and communication (Ee, Koh, Liu, Tan, Wang, 2009). Some students found it challenging to work with difficult students within their groups. Although, the experience taught them to be patient and tolerant of others, which promote character building and social skills.
Even though students did not always enjoy the process of project work, they valued it for the skills it taught and viewed it positively. Teachers and students were in agreement over the potential value of group work in terms of the opportunities for personal and life-skills development it offers to students.

Conclusion

To increase success in cooperative learning groups and effective communications, it is important that teachers become educated on cooperative learning and the benefits of teaching social skills. They will begin to notice many advantages throughout all areas in school since students spend a large amount of the day interacting with each other and learning from one another. Some studies indicate that socializing appropriately with peers will not only improve student learning, but also the school environment, student attitudes and successes throughout school and future endeavors. As educators, understanding what works in our classrooms and what is best for our students is imperative. I think these social skills will not only help us maximize the learning environment, but I believe they are a crucial part of our everyday lives.

Based on the information presented in this literature review, teachers' understanding of cooperative learning and the importance of social skills will increase student learning within the classroom. Giving students the tools to interact with others effectively maximizes the knowledge they will gain from
their peers. Getting beyond teacher and student misconceptions is the first step toward students acquiring the benefits of cooperation and transferring that knowledge into other situations within their daily lives. Lack of appropriate social skills creates other problems found in society today. Having these skills builds a foundation for students and minimizes or eliminates other problems within the classroom and society that occur today.
Chapter 3

Applications and Evaluation

I believe that students showing a lack of social skills and cooperative efforts within group work can benefit from a school that teaches social skills and uses cooperative learning strategies in their classrooms. The integration of social skills programs within the school setting will help to increase not only student attitude and success, but school climate and community as well. The results of this study may encourage school administrators and teachers to incorporate these strategies and lessons into their classroom instruction.

The objective of this research project was to determine how social skills contribute to successful cooperative learning within the classroom. I looked at how incorporating and teaching social skills in classroom lessons affects student’s interaction and behaviors while working in cooperative groups. I looked at student perceptions of social interaction within cooperative group work, if students applied the learned social skills, and if the teaching of the social skills helped increase social interaction within cooperative learning groups. If teaching social skills shows to be an important factor in successful cooperative learning groups, I will be sure to include the proper integration of these skills in future lessons.
Participants

Six students participated in this study. They were selected from a suburban school district in western New York. The participants consisted primarily of middle to upper-middle class students and all students were Caucasian. This target group included four females and two males consisting of diverse social and academic strengths. They were chosen based upon their need for appropriate social skills to enable proper interaction when working in cooperative learning groups. The participants ranged from 11 to 12 years of age, in a sixth grade social studies classroom.

As the participating teacher action researcher, I am a general education teacher with three years teaching experience. I have a duel certification in general education and special education from Saint John Fisher College. I am currently teaching sixth grade social studies and ELA for my second consecutive year.

Procedures of Study

Once the letters of consent to parents (Appendix A) and letters to students (Appendix B), were signed outlining the procedures and tasks of the study, the questionnaires were administered (Appendix C) to students to examine their perceptions of social interaction during group work. In addition, students
recorded reflections of group interaction within their journals. I also recorded observations, anecdotal notes and reflections based on interaction within the cooperative groups. The questionnaires and journals tracked changes in attitudes and perceptions regarding social interaction in cooperative learning groups.

To determine if teaching social skills increased student perceptions about working in groups for three weeks, the students were given direct instruction in four targeted social skills of listening, complimenting, problem solving and asking for clarification. After the direct instruction and group work, students completed a journal entry reflecting on what they thought went well in the group and what needed to be improved. This process was repeated after every social skills lesson and activity. At the conclusion of the study, students completed the same questionnaire to determine if their perception of social interaction within cooperative group work had improved.

Instruments for Study

Parents of students involved in this study received letters (Appendix A) home explaining the purpose of the study. Another instrument used in this study included the Social Skills Rating System Manuel, written by Frank M. Gresham and Stephen N. Elliott, published by American Guidance Service Inc.
The rating scale from the above source was adapted for the questionnaire used to assess the perception of social interaction critical to sixth graders in a cooperative group setting. The questionnaire was given to students at the beginning and conclusion of the study. These questionnaires given to the students, along with their reflections, were used to measure changes in student perceptions during group work.
Chapter IV

Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate how social skills contribute to successful cooperative learning groups within the classroom and if students applied the learned social skills to increase social interaction. In order to do this, social skill lessons were implemented during the three week study within the classroom which focused on listening, complimenting others, asking for clarification and problem solving.

Students answered a questionnaire at the beginning and end of the study, and they reflected in journals at the end of cooperative group work. Teacher observations were made based on student interaction during group work. The teacher observations and anecdotal notes focused on the use of the previously taught social skills within the group work and other observations of student interaction within the group.

The action research began with a twenty item student questionnaire to investigate student perceptions of social interaction within group work. Using a Likert scale, students were asked to rate how much they agreed with a given statement. Numbers on the Likert scale ranged from 1 to 5; 1 being “almost
never”, 2 “seldom”, 3 “sometimes”, 4 “often” and 5 “almost always”. Each statement focused on one of the four targeted social skills.

Table 1 Pre-Assessment Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Skill and Item Numbers</th>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Almost Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening Item: 2, 10, 13, 17, 19</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complimenting Item: 7, 11, 12, 18</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying Item: 1, 3, 5, 6, 14, 15</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving Item: 4, 8, 9, 16, 20</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the data in Table 1 above, eighty percent of the students responded that they often or almost always used the social skill of listening. Seventy-five percent of the students also said they compliment others often or almost always when working with others. Another observation from the questionnaire showed that fifty-three percent of students often or almost always ask for clarification when they are confused. The final section of the questionnaire showed that fifty-six percent of students would often or almost
always think of ways to use problem solving skills in problematic situations when working with others.

Table 2 Post-Assessment Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Skill and Item Numbers</th>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Almost Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening Item: 2, 10, 13, 17, 19</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complimenting Item: 7, 11, 12, 18</td>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying Item: 1, 3, 5, 6, 14, 15</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving Item: 4, 8, 9, 16, 20</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table 2, seventy percent of students responded they often or almost always use listening skills when working with others, which is a ten percent decrease from the previous questionnaire. Eighty-eight percent of students responded they often or almost always compliment other students. Another observation from table two shows that seventy-five percent of students responded they use clarification strategies when they are confused. Finally, fifty-
seven percent of students responded they often or almost always use problem solving skills in group situations.

The two tables revealed that there was a decrease in the area of listening skills by ten percent. Students responded that they often or almost always used listening skills, from eighty percent on the pre-assessment questionnaire to seventy percent on the post-assessment. Another observation that did not indicate a major difference between the two questionnaires was problem solving. The percent of students responding to problem solving questions only showed a one percent increase. The two areas that showed a more obvious increase were complimenting others and clarification skills. Complimenting others increased from seventy-five percent on the pre-assessment to eighty-eight percent on the post assessment. Clarification went from fifty-six percent to seventy-five percent.

The purpose of the student reflections was to examine student perceptions of how the social interaction went within the group work. At the end of each lesson, students were asked to reflect on the social skill that was taught, describing if it was used well and what needed improvement within the group.

The information noted in the student reflections had many similarities. There were several strengths found in most reflections. Within their reflections,
students stated they were able to transfer other social skills previously taught into other lessons. They not only commented on the skill taught in that day’s lesson, but they commented on previously taught social skills as well. One students wrote, “We did a good job of clarification and asking questions about what we did not understand, but I think we need to stay more on task.” Another student indicated, “I think my group did well with clarification skills because we went back in the reading to look at where we had a misunderstanding. We still need to work on problem solving because when one member wanted to read the story again, the rest of the group did not and they just ignored him.” There were other comments such as asking each other to slow down and repeat what they had said so that the students could take notes or fill in information on their sheets.

The reflections also noted areas of weaknesses. Some students stated that staying on task for some group members was a challenge. Often times, they thought some group members were off task and somewhat distracted. One student stated, “Next time I think all the groups need to stay more on task. I believe that’s a weakness in groups, because you start to talk about things going around school. I think all of us need to work on that and make it stronger.” Another student commented, “My group worked well, but someone was talking and fooling around. I should have encouraged him to work.” This information
and feedback from the reflections will help focus social skills lessons taught in the future.

The purpose of the teacher reflections and anecdotal notes from observations of students working in groups was to gather information and examine the interaction of their use of the targeted social skills. After the targeted social skill was taught and students brainstormed ideas of what the skill would look like and sound like, they were put in cooperative learning groups to work on an assignment. While students worked in cooperative groups many observations were noted.

There were many positive observations made while students worked in cooperative groups. Students worked well on listening to each other, using appropriate body language, such as eye contact, nodding, and asking questions when appropriate. Another observation made was when students needed clarification they would ask the group member to repeat what was said, to slow down if taking notes, or to show them where the information was found within the book. Students also used some of the phrases in groups that were examples from what was brainstormed together on the class chart for the targeted social skill. However, students would always look to the teacher to ensure what they were saying was being heard. Some of the comments made or compliments given were “forced” or seemed “phony” and followed by students laughing.
Other observations noted had some negative effects within the group work. During the assigned activity, students were very conscious of time constraints. This would cause them to rush through the work and just copy information down rather than teach it to members of their group. This took away the opportunity to clarify or ask questions when students were unsure of the information presented to them. Another observation was noted from one of the groups. They had split into two smaller groups instead of one larger group, minimizing the opportunity for discourse.
Chapter V

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to determine whether social skills introduced in formal instruction contributed to successful cooperative learning within the classroom. I looked at student perceptions of social interaction within cooperative group work, and if the teaching of the social skills helped increase social interaction within cooperative learning groups. The study consisted of a pre and post questionnaire, student reflections and teacher anecdotal notes and reflections from observations of group work.

When comparing the pre- and post-student questionnaire, interesting results were revealed. There was a ten percent decrease with the social skill of listening. This could be due to the fact that once students were taught what this skill actually looked like and sounded like during group work, they may have realized they were not as good at listening as they thought or possibly they became more critical of themselves. Even with the ten percent decrease seventy percent of students responded that they use the social skill of listening often or almost always.

The questionnaire also showed the social skill of problem solving did not have a significant change from the pre to post questionnaire. The one percent increase could be due to the fact that throughout the study there were no real
issues of conflict within the groups. This could be a good indication to why there was no significant difference noted.

The two targeted social skills that showed important changes were in the areas of complimenting others and clarification. Complimenting others increased from seventy-five percent to eighty-eight percent. This could be because students never realized the importance of acknowledging other student contributions within the group and how it contributes to group success. This was interesting to see because it showed that students like to be recognized for their participation. Clarification also increased from fifty-six percent to seventy-five percent. One explanation could be the brainstorming of ideas on how to get clarification when confused or how to appropriately get help and ask questions. This also seemed to indicate that students are beginning to feel more comfortable advocating for themselves when they are unsure about something.

The student reflections showed several interesting trends as well. Students were able to recognize when their group was effectively using the social skills taught. Many of their responses included not only the targeted social skill from that day’s lesson, but also social skills that were previously taught. They were able to give examples of what went well and what needed improvement. I noticed that a number of their responses would help to focus instruction of social skills that needed to be taught in future lessons. They could reflect on
themselves and others within the group. The increase of student awareness of their actions while working in groups helped to hold themselves accountable for their actions and learning within the groups.

There were also many interesting interactions that were noted while I took notes and reflected on the observations of students working in groups. As I observed students, I noticed they were using some of the terms the class brainstormed around the social skill. They also would demonstrate what these skills looked like, such as eye contact to show the skill of listening, when in groups. I noticed how students wanted me to hear how they were using the skills in their groups because they knew I was listening and keeping track of what I noticed. Some of their comments would seem forced or somewhat phony because they knew it was a focus of the lesson and not just the content. This is noted in the work of Johnson and Johnson 1998, that students will go through a series of phases while learning these skills in the classroom. They will start off as phony and gradually over time become sincere and automatic. This was true to what I was seeing at this point in the groups.

Overall, based on the results from my research, I was able to come up with the following conclusions. Teaching social skills in the classroom on a regular basis benefits students while working in cooperative groups. Although some of the results from the student questionnaires were not as I had hoped, this
short study did show an increase in some of the targeted skill areas. Also the student reflections showed an increase in awareness and my observations also noticed many positive interactions and comments made while students worked in groups. This study was a short three weeks in length; however it showed an increase in some of the targeted social skills in this limited amount of time. This supports that having a yearlong curriculum that integrates teaching social skills in the classroom should increase student interaction in a positive way.

If I had to do this project over again, I would have parents get more involved to monitor their child's social skills outside of the classroom. I would also start from the beginning of the school year in order to get a better gauge of student perceptions and growth of social interactions during group work. Starting at the beginning of the year would also allow for more time for students to fully engage in some of the social situations that were not presented during this study such as problem solving. There may have been more time for real conflict to occur that forced students to work through the issue and apply the learned skills.

There are other recommendations that I would give to someone implementing social skills within the classroom. Get other teachers and parents involved. If social skills were integrated within the school community, it would help teachers become more successful with teaching it and enforcing it on a day
to day basis. Parental involvement also provides additional insights to teachers about their students and the progress they are making in social situations outside of school.

Another recommendation, and possibly the most important one, is that teacher education on teaching social skills is critical. They need to clear up any assumptions or misconceptions they have about social skills and group work. They need to become educated on how to teach these skills and not just how to teach it, but present it to the class in a meaningful way. They need to establish the need for the skills first, explain the importance of it and when it should be used, and practice it multiple times throughout the year, providing time for students to assess and process how well they used the skill in order to improve its use. This needs to be done often enough throughout the year in order for students to properly internalize the skill and go beyond the awkward enactment of using the skills (Johnson, Johnson and Holubec, 1998).

It is important for teachers and parents not to assume that students possess these social skills and receive appropriate educated on how to teach social skills effectively. Hard work and collaboration are critical components for students to have every chance for success. It is up to us to prepare them for success, not just in school, but for their future. This small study is just one
example of how social skills are powerful tools that we need to equip our students with for future success.
References


Appendices
Appendix A: Letter to Parents
December 8, 2009

Dear Sixth Grade Families,

I am conducting a study to investigate how social skills contribute to successful cooperative learning within the classroom. It involves administering a survey before the study to pre-assess student perceptions of social interaction within group work, and again at the conclusion of the study, to see if direct teaching of social skills improved the cooperative learning within the groups. In addition, students will be asked to reflect on their experiences within the group and in their journals based on what went well, what needs further improvement and their personal feelings and opinions as well.

I, Danielle Mercendetti, a student at SUNY College at Brockport will be conducting this research. If you agree to have your child participate in this study, s/he will be asked to complete a survey about her/his perceptions about social interaction within group work.

The possible benefit from being in this study could be that information will be learned that would allow teachers to better prepare young people with effective social skills that can lead to success in the future.

Your child’s participation in this study is completely voluntary. Being in it or refusing to be in it, will not affect your child’s grades or class standing. S/he is free to change her/his mind or stop being in the study at any time.

You understand that:

1. Your child’s participation is voluntary and s/he has the right to refuse to answer any questions. S/he will have a chance to discuss any questions about the study with the researcher after completing the questionnaire.

2. Your child's confidentiality will be guaranteed. Her/his name will not be written on the survey. There will be no way to connect your child to the written survey. If any publication results from this research, s/he would not be identified by name. Results will be given anonymously and in group form only, so that the participants are not identified. Your child’s participation in this study will have no effect on their grades.

3. There will be no anticipated personal risks or benefits because of your child’s participation in this project.
4. Your child’s participation involves reading a written survey of questions about their perceptions of social interaction within group work. It is estimated that it will take 10 minutes to complete the survey.

5. Approximately six students will take part in this study. The results will be used for the completion of a research project by the primary researcher.

6. Data and consent forms will be kept separately in a locked filing cabinet by the investigator and will be destroyed by shredding when the research has been completed.

You are being asked whether or not you will permit your child to participate in this study. If you wish to give permission to participate, and you agree with the statement below, please sign in the space provided. Remember, you may change your mind at any point and withdraw from the study. Your child can refuse to participate even if you have given permission for her/him to participate.

I understand the information provided in this form and agree to allow my child to participate as a participant in this project. I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about my child’s participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction.

If you have any questions you may contact:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary researcher</th>
<th>Faculty Advisor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Danielle Mercendetti</td>
<td>Thomas Allen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>585-336-4737</td>
<td>Department of Education and Human Development 585-395-2205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="mailto:Dmarie232001@yahoo.com">Dmarie232001@yahoo.com</a></td>
<td><a href="mailto:trallen@brockport.edu">trallen@brockport.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Signature of Parent ___________________________ Date ________________
Child’s name ________________________________
Appendix B: Letters to Students
December 8, 2009

Dear Sixth Graders,

As many of you already know, I am taking a college course at SUNY College at Brockport, and I am studying how social skills contribute to successful cooperative learning within the classroom. I also want to get to know more about how you feel about working with others. You know that in sixth grade we do a lot of group work and I feel this is important to learn about this information so that the classroom runs smoothly.

If you are willing to participate in my study, I will have you answer questions in a survey on your thoughts about working with others in groups. I will ask you to reflect on your experiences at the end of each group work lesson and I will also take notes and observations that I gather while you are working in groups to share with other teachers and researchers. Your identity will remain confidential throughout the whole study, and nobody will know your name.

Your parent or guardian has given permission for you to take part in this project, but it is also your decision as well. If you decide to participate and change your mind at a later time, just let me know and we will take you out of the study. You can do this at any time without any problems. Whether you participate in this study or not, your grade will not be effected nor your standing in class.

If you choose to participate in this study by completing the survey, reflecting in your journal and allowing me to gather data through observations of your group work and share it with others, please write your name and date below.

Thank you for your participation,

Miss Mercendetti

Name_____________________________ Date________________________
Appendix C: Student Questionnaire
**Directions:** Answer each question by circling one of the numbers next to each question. Answer each question to the best of your ability. There are no right or wrong answers.

Circle 1: if you *almost never* do what the question asks.
Circle 2: if you *seldom* do what the question asks.
Circle 3: if you *sometimes* do what the question asks.
Circle 4: if you do what the question asks *often*.
Circle 5: if you *almost always* do what the question asks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Almost never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Almost always</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I notice when somebody needs help and try to help that person.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I listen to someone who is talking to me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I join in on class or group discussions.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I suggest things to do in a group.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I am willing to share my ideas with others.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I know when I have to ask to do something, and I ask in a friendly way.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. I make friends easily.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. When I don’t agree with somebody, I think of a plan to make both of us happy.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. I start conversations with</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>classroom members.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>I finish classroom work on time.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>I invite others to join in social activities.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>I say nice things to others when they have done</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>something well.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>I listen to others when they are talking with me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>I ask for help when I am confused.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>I avoid doing things with others if I am confused.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>I compromise with others when we have disagreements.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>I ignore classmates that are making poor choices.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>I smile, wave or nod at others.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>I follow directions.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>I end disagreements calmly.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>