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# Fourth and Fifth Grade Teachers' Perspectives of the Benefits of Incorporating Cooperative Learning Activities

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**Fourth and Fifth Grade Teachers' Perspectives of the Benefits of Incorporating  
Cooperative Learning Activities**

By William Nyhof

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of  
The College at Brockport, State University of New York in partial fulfillment of the  
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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

Have you ever taught a lesson that you thought was clear and informative and then when you asked the students a few comprehension questions they stared at you with a blank look on their faces? I believe that engaging students in cooperative learning activities during the lesson can prevent this from happening. Ryan, Reid, and Epstein (2004) define cooperative learning as small group teaching and learning strategies, which actively seek to promote inter-dependence among group members such that each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn. I have discovered that when I engage students in cooperative learning activities they are actively engaged with the content of the lesson and interacting with their peers in ways that support their learning.

I remember teaching a math lesson to a group of fifth graders about multiplying numbers, using the power of tens. I began the lesson with the students sitting at their desks. I was in front of the class, demonstrating how to multiply numbers with a base root of ten.

After teaching for about ten minutes, straight from the textbook, I started asking the students comprehension questions. I wrote the number 56.457 and asked, “What would happen if I multiplied it by 10?” After about 30 seconds of the students looking at me with blank expressions, I realized they had not understood what I had been demonstrating for the past ten minutes. I thought to myself “How can I help the students understand this concept better?” I looked around the classroom and found a bin of Koosh balls. I asked five students to come up to the front of the room and to bring their white boards with them. I had the students line up in front of the class in no particular order and I asked them to hold their blank whiteboards in front of them. I then wrote one number from the problem on each of their boards and asked the students

to arrange themselves so they were in the same order as the number on the Smart Board (56457). The only thing missing was the decimal.

I took a Koosh ball from the bin and explained that the ball was going to represent the decimal. I asked the class where the ball would go if I wanted to represent the number on the Smart Board. The students told me that it had to go between the six and four. I then explained that if I multiplied the number by ten, the decimal would have to move one place to the right, so I had the students holding the ball to pass it one place to the right. The class seemed engaged and understanding the concept better than when I asked the first question. They volunteered and I could see that they wanted to participate in the activity. I noticed that all of the students who were sitting in their seats were attentive to what was happening in the front of the classroom.

The volunteers and I continued to show examples of multiplying numbers other than ten, but still using the base root of ten. I then divided the class into three groups and had them use their white boards and a Koosh ball to complete the ten problems I created on the Smart Board.

As I walked around checking in with each group, I could see that they were all engaged and were having fun at the same time. They were participating in the activity and were communicating with each other. They were writing the numbers on the board, making sure the numbers were in the correct order, or making sure the Koosh ball was in the correct place. If students did not agree where the Koosh ball was supposed to be, they talked about why they thought it was supposed to be in that spot.

As I walked around I made informal observations of how different students interacted with their peers. I also asked informal comprehension questions such as “Why did the Koosh ball/decimal point move here?” Or “What way is the Koosh ball/decimal point going to move and how many places?” As Conderman, Bresnahan, and Hedin (2012) recognize, the use of

active involvement methods enable teachers to collect ongoing student data that immediately informs the instruction-assessment cycle.

I learned from this experience that about one-half of my students were not engaged with the lesson and not focused on the topic while I was teaching in a traditional style, i.e., lecturing from a textbook. When I got the students physically involved and learning with their peers and interacting with different manipulatives, they seemed to more thoroughly understand the concept and communicate their understanding with their peers more effectively. They were asking questions about whether the Koosh ball/decimal point would move to the left or right and they were correcting each other if someone had made a mistake.

Jensen (2008) confirms that not only do students learn by doing- and that movement is the students' preferred mode of learning- but also that physical activity activates the brain much more than doing seatwork. The math lesson provided an opportunity for the students to communicate while participating in this lesson. They had to discuss with each other why they were moving the decimal point (ball) to the left or right and how many places. If one student tried to move it the wrong way without talking with his group, the group would ask what he was doing and why, which created an opportunity for the student to explain his thinking. If he was right, the group would then agree with him. If he was wrong, the group would explain why he was wrong and move the ball to the correct spot. I observed them using problem solving strategies and explaining why the decimal point (ball) had to move where it moved.

I believe cooperative learning activities such as this can promote interaction between and among peers and enable students to hear different perspectives about the lesson's content because they are learning with someone other than the teacher. Cooperative learning activities provide opportunities for students to teach their peers, which allows them to gain a better

knowledge of the concept. According to Archer-Kath, Johnson, and Johnson (1994) (as cited in Bertucci, Johnson, Johnson, & Conte, 2012) group processing has been found to increase the achievement of all students (high, medium, and low-ability), increase achievement motivation, assist with uniformity of achievement among group members, and attempt to influence group mates toward higher achievement.

In my classroom, cooperative learning activities provide students with opportunities to move around the room while using different senses to learn, which is in contrast to the more traditional way of learning, they are using just their eyes and ears while sitting at their desks. Hruska and Clancy (2008) state that variety or changing the routine or format of lessons can increase students' ability to focus and their level of motivation to learn, the researchers also claim that active instruction can wake-up the brain.

Through my use of cooperative learning activities, I have noticed that students seem to enjoy working with their peers. Group processing creates opportunities for students to clarify and improve their efforts to achieve the group's goals and maintain effective working relationships (Johnson & Johnson, 2005). I believe that if the students are working together cooperatively, the work of each student is of higher quality. Group processing can be considered a metacognitive procedure that helps students improve their ability in managing task work and teamwork and, consequently, be more successful as a group (Bertucci, Johnson, Johnson, & Conte, 2012). Bertucci, Johnson, Johnson and Conte (2012) discuss the fact that when students are working together as a team, they are talking about their thinking process and discussing how they found the answer, which will help them all individually as well as the group as a whole. I believe when we explain our thinking to someone or teach someone how to perform a task, it reinforces the skills for us because we are required to verbalize our thought process. Bertucci, Johnson,

Johnson, and Conte (2012) state that as group processing increases, the quality of students' teamwork, and the quality of their task work also tends to increase.

### **Significance of the Problem**

Prince (2004) defines traditional teaching as students typically learning in a didactic manner. That is, taking notes while listening to their teacher lecture. I believe that students in the lower grades e.g., k, 1,2 are able to sit for a shorter period of time, where students in the upper grades are able to sit for a longer period of time and remain focused. Through my teaching experience I believe the average attention span for a fourth grade student is about 30 minutes. The significant problem that I see with traditional teaching is that teachers ask students to sit for too long. I believe that a traditional lecture style classroom asks the students to sit for about 45 minutes to an hour, while they take notes or do independent work. Sitting can increase fatigue and reduce concentration (Jensen, 2008). Movement feeds oxygen, water, and glucose to the brain, optimizing its performance (Jensen, 2008).

As a teacher, I would like my students to comprehend everything I am teaching them while they sit and take notes, if I am teaching in a traditional lecture style. Cooperative learning activities involve active engagement which occur when students process information through talking, moving, writing, manipulating, interacting, reading, discussing, and exploring values and attitudes rather than just watching and listening. Individuals learn better when they are actively engaged (Conderman, Bresnahan, & Hedin, 2012).

I was a student who struggled academically throughout grammar school, middle school, and all the way through high school. I found school boring and never looked forward to class. I would often find myself daydreaming and not listening to the teacher. It was not a problem that I



was not focused on the lesson, until I was asked a question. It was difficult for me to pay attention to my teachers and stay focused on the lesson and it seemed like the teachers were giving us information that, I felt, at the time, I did not need to know. My peers and I sat at our desks and took notes, and it was very difficult for me to stay attentive and learn while the teacher lectured to us. When I reflect on my experiences as a student and realize that I am more of a “hands on” learner. I feel I learn best when I am interacting with different manipulatives in the classroom or conversing with my peers about my understanding.

I always looked forward to lunch, recess, and physical education, until fourth grade when I had a teacher who was able to keep my attention on the lessons by getting me and my peers involved and learning together. It was the first time I was really engaged in the lessons, and my grades improved as a result. My fourth grade teacher, Mr. Watts, used methods I had never experienced before. He always had us up and moving and interacting with our peers. He made lessons fun by having us work together as teams and problem solve with each other. According to Archer-Kath, Johnson, and Johnson (1994) (as cited in Bertucci, Johnson, Johnson, & Conte, 2012) group processing also results in more positive relationships between participants with and without disabilities, greater self-esteem, and more positive attitudes toward the subject area. Fourth grade with Mr. Watts was the first time I really looked forward to going to school and learning with my classmates. It felt like there was not a single student who was left out in that class, I did not notice any bullying or any confrontations that went on in Mr. Watts’ class and I believe it was due to the classroom rules he established for how he expected us to interact with each other, and our ability to communicate with each other.

Hatfield (1995) stated that active learning is not solely a set of learning activities, but rather it is more of an attitude-altering approach on the part of both students and faculty. I

believe that Hatfield is referring to the type of attitude that both students and teacher need to possess for active learning to be successful in the classroom. I think the teacher needs to have set expectations regarding what behaviors students should embody while they are participating in cooperative learning. I believe the teacher needs to establish communication skills and teamwork skills with their students. I believe that students need to understand how to communicate with their peers and how to take on different roles while working in a group. Mr. Watts required us to discuss all of our problems out together, without his assistance. He made sure that we all understood that every student had a different role while participating in the group. One thing that Mr. Watts required out of every student was respect. He told us that if we couldn't respect one another, then we would not be able to work as a team.

I think one of the benefits of a cooperative learning is that students learn how to interact with their peers and how to problem solve through communication. There is considerable evidence that more social support is experienced (academically and personally) from peers and teachers in cooperative situations rather than in individualistic and competitive situations (Johnson & Johnson, 2005).

Active, authentic learning is far more likely than rote learning to foster a lifelong love of the learning process (Jensen, 2008). When I lectured and had the students sit and listen, the students were not learning everything that I was teaching. I suspect that there were students in the class like me who would sit and sketch on the paper and think about things that were not related to the lesson. When it came to understanding the information, those students may have struggled and needed to spend their recess or lunch trying to get caught up, which could lead to more frustration on both the part of the teacher and the students. Cooperative learning activities involve active engagement, which enables teachers to provide interest and variety in their

instruction, simultaneously engage all students, and conduct ongoing informal assessment of students' skills (Conderman, Bresnahan, & Hedin, 2012).

Active learning is one way to capture the students' attention because it involves hands-on and collaborative methodology (Sirinterlikci, Zane, & Sirinterlikci, 2009). I believe that when I asked students to interact with their peers during the math lesson it enabled them to stay engaged in the lesson and it created opportunities for me to notice if a student was not participating and learning. I believe that cooperative learning activities provide opportunities for students to communicate with each other, which lead to opportunities for problem solving, building relationships, movement, and peer instruction. Ferguson-Patrick (2012) states that cooperative learning activities help develop positive relationships and helps manage conflict so cooperative classrooms are likely to be more harmonious and democratic. I believe that Ferguson-Patrick's statement looks at how positive working relationships help promote positive personal relationships between peers. I believe that Ferguson-Patrick recognizes that when students work as a group or team that they have more of a democratic say in how they learn together.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to help me build my understanding of cooperative learning. Specifically, I was curious to learn how fourth and fifth grade teachers in a school district in western New York viewed and incorporated cooperative learning activities into their work with students. I believe the study's findings help me better understand some of the benefits of using cooperative learning activities with students and how teachers implement them on a daily basis. The study's findings also reveal how teachers use this approach to engage students and provide opportunities for them to work with their peers. Conducting the study enabled me to look at the

different teachers' classroom management styles and the behaviors that they try to cultivate in their students to be successful during cooperative learning activities. The findings demonstrate how teachers are incorporating cooperative learning into their instruction and how their students are benefiting from the experiences.

My research questions were:

What do fourth and fifth grade teachers see as the benefits of incorporating cooperative learning activities into their work with students?

How do fourth and fifth grade teachers in western New York incorporate cooperative learning into their work with students?

### **Study Approach**

I conducted a study that used a qualitative approach to answer my research questions. I asked teachers how they incorporated cooperative learning activities into their curriculum and their perspectives about cooperative learning as an effective style of teaching. The study had a qualitative component because I asked the teachers to respond to a series of open-ended questions.

I distributed the survey questions to 29 fourth and fifth grade teachers. In the questions, I asked the teachers to describe how they incorporated the approach and the different management skills they used in order for their students to be successful during the activities. One of my goals with the survey was to understand teachers' perspectives of how this approach impacted and supported students' relationships and if there was more inclusion and less judgment between the students when provided the opportunity to interact with one another when there was no teacher directive (e.g., during recess, lunch, or before or after school).

After I analyzed the survey results, another goal was to incorporate cooperative learning activities into my instruction. I shared the survey results with all of the teachers who participated in the survey. A future goal is to share the survey results with the principals of the four elementary schools, in hopes that they would help motivate other teachers to use cooperative learning with their students.

### **Rationale**

I wanted to learn about some of the ways fourth and fifth grade teachers incorporated cooperative learning activities into their curriculum and what benefits they saw as a result. I asked them open-ended questions that would help me better understand the different management skills needed for cooperative learning activities. I hoped each teacher would provide information about the benefits they saw from cooperative learning activities.

I studied cooperative learning because as indicated earlier, I am a firm believer that students should be actively involved in their learning more so than they are in classrooms in which teachers use lectures. I believed that by asking our students to sit for over 30 minutes, we ask them to sit for too long, which may cause them to lose focus. Contemporary educational research indicates that a passive environment is not effective and results in limited retention of knowledge by students (Prince, 2004). I think the use of cooperative learning activities is a way to enhance the student learning. When students are engaged with the content of a lesson and communicating with their peers, they express their ideas and listen to their peers' ideas, which, I think, enable them to look at problems from a different point of view.

## **Summary**

I believe there are many benefits to using cooperative learning activities and I think there are different ways that we as educators can incorporate cooperative learning activities into our daily instruction. Through this study, I surveyed fourth and fifth grade teachers to learn how they incorporated cooperative learning activities into their curriculum. Teachers required a wide range of management skills for cooperative learning activities to be successful in their classroom. I believe that the use of cooperative learning activities can benefit both the teacher and the student if they are implemented effectively. Cooperative learning activities encompass many different aspects of social learning and I believe that they can promote environments that build meaningful relationships between and among students as well as with the teacher.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Guiding Questions**

How is cooperative learning beneficial in the classroom?

How can teachers implement cooperative learning in their own classrooms?

I synthesized literature related to the implementation of active and cooperative learning in the classroom in order to support my stance that cooperative learning in the classroom is essential. Through my close reading of relevant educational research journals, I discovered study after study showed how teachers and students recognize the benefits of experiences that encourages student-directed work with an emphasis on critical thinking, full group participation, and reflection. Student learning outcomes in these studies demonstrate that adjusting learning experiences to utilize cooperative learning strategies is effective for students of all learning styles and levels.

### **What is Cooperative Learning?**

Cooperative learning is a teaching strategy in which teachers use a variety of small-group learning activities to improve student understanding of a particular subject or topic. Students are responsible for their own learning, as well as assisting their group members with comprehension. A form of cooperative learning is active learning. Active learning ensures that students are doing more than just listening to a lecture. Through active learning, students discover, process, and apply information (Meyers & Jones, 1998). Cooperative learning allows students to learn socially with peers, being given the opportunity to explain their thought process, and resolve situations and problems through communication. Active learning engages students in the

material and the lesson whether through movement or through conversations that prompt students to dive deeper into the material.

According to Johnson (2005), cooperative learning must consist of five basic elements. Participants must exercise positive interdependence, participate in frequent face-to-face interaction, take accountability for their work and actions in order to achieve group goals, utilize interpersonal skills, and reflect on the process of work in order to grow and succeed in the future.

### **Problems Addressed in Study**

In the traditional lecture style classroom, students are not fully engaged in the learning because only one student can participate at a time (Conderman, Bresnahan & Hedin, 2012). Because the climate of our classrooms became more diverse, we as teachers had to also adjust by shifting our methods of instruction. Our classrooms were filled with a variety of learning styles, language barriers and learning disabilities. Cooperative learning enabled us to engage each student individually in the critical thinking process, and allowed them to take accountability for their learning (Conderman, Bresnahan, & Hedin, 2012). When students worked in an active and cooperative way, they were more apt to take accountability for their work, listen to their classmates ideas, and also apply problem solving techniques. In a traditional classroom, not all students were engaged in the material. Not all students were comprehending the information that was being taught in a lecture setting. Students were more apt to disengage, and the teacher may have struggled to recognize which students were not engaged with the lesson or the material. It was also difficult to assess their learning on a continual basis.



## Supporting Data

Cooperative learning occurs when students work together in small heterogeneous groups performing group tasks set by the teacher and directed by the students (Cohen, 1994).

Cooperative learning can involve many different aspects of learning and provide opportunities for students to interact with one another and practice the skill of verbal communication between one another. When groups members process the material together, they “reconstruct and reflect on the sequence of their actions and interactions” that lead to the group’s outcomes so members can clarify and improve their efforts to achieve the group’s goals and maintain effective working relationships” (Bertucci, Conte, Johnson & Johnson, 2012, p329). When students were given the opportunity to discuss the reasons they arrived at their answers, they were better equipped to complete more rigorous tasks. When students understood the reasons that they were performing their tasks, they became more engaged in the work that they did and felt that their effort had value.

In a study of third graders, Shoval (2011) explored the idea that students who physically active while seeking knowledge were more successful than passive peers. Shoval (2011) examined cooperative learning with movement-aided learning activities of students in groups about angles in geometry class. Shoval (2011) studied cooperative learning as children in small groups performed interactive activities such as experiments, presenting ideas to their peers, helping each other and talking to each other. Shoval’s study examined 261 students from eight-second and third grade classrooms in six different schools. The experimental group included 158 learners from five classes that learned about angles by integrating movement and cooperative learning activities.

The results were measured by external assessors and compared between groups of active, social and passive learning. Shoval (2011) found that when students incorporate movement into their cooperative learning activities, they begin to overcome language barriers, improve their social interactions, and enhance social cognitive conflicts. As stated earlier, language barriers, diverse learning styles and disabilities that were more present in our classrooms required different methods of learning. When teachers effectively implemented more active learning strategies, students were more capable of dealing with interpersonal conflicts, as well as recognizing and being respectful of all types of differences.

### **Outcomes in the Professional Studies**

According to Johnson and Johnson (1994), students in cooperative conditions enjoyed the subject matter more, had higher levels of self-esteem, and were more inclusive and accepting of diversity. The students who continually worked in groups recognized and responded to the assets of each group member. When young students felt that their opinions were valued, they were more likely to contribute to future group and full class discussion.

In a research study titled “Transfer of Active Learning Strategies from the Teacher Education Classroom to the PreK- 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Classrooms,” Bradford (2012) described how a “community-centered classroom provides a supportive environment where students can learn from one another in cooperative groups” (As cited in Pepper, Blackwell, & Monroe, 2012, p2). Student learning was more effective when students used the resources of their peers, when students believed their efforts mattered to the success of their group, and when they had the opportunity to link their life experiences to learning within the classroom. McCarthy and Anderson (2000) assessed the impact of role-playing and collaborative activities on student

achievement and found how these alternatives to the traditional lecture technique helped students to achieve better grades on the standardized assessment.

Teachers are not the only ones who advocate for these strategies. Students also voiced their preference of cooperative and active learning, which was illuminated by Whicker, Bol, and Nunnery (1997) who conducted a study to determine high school mathematics students' achievement and attitudes toward cooperative learning. They split the group into two different groups and had one group learn the material in cooperative groups and the other learned the material independently. There were three chapter tests that assessed the students' achievement along with a questionnaire. The students in the cooperative groups had increasing higher scores on the tests. The questionnaires were in favor of the students using cooperative groups compared to working independently.

Students recognized that they are better able to focus on classroom tasks when they participated in active learning activities. Students were able to socialize with group mates in order for each of their voices to be heard.

Shaw agreed with a large number of educators who "claim that students should not be passive during the learning process and states that the approaches which involve students in the process of constructing knowledge should be adopted" (As cited in Gurbuz, Catlioglu, Birgin, & Erdem, 2010, p1054). Students learned better when they were creating and building individual questions and making connections. Teachers who had diverse classrooms should prompt students to construct their own knowledge.

Braniff (2011) explored how the use of movement for fourth graders helped the students reach their potential. The stress level of students was also reduced, allowing them to approach their tasks with more focus and clarity. Using stations, jumping and stretching intervals to

conduct blood flow, and transitional breaks, Braniff discovered that movement affected classroom management because students were quieter and more focused when they were allowed to choose their place of work. Students who had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) performed much better after taking a small break. Students were also eager to move. They took pride in their actions, and, in turn, also their work after taking a small break. Movement impacted the student's perception of learning.

Braniff asked the students to journal about their observations of this activity. Their responses were positive, noting that their grades were higher on the work that they completed during these types of active days. This study also concluded that student anxiety in the classroom was decreased when they were allowed to make choices about where they worked, took accountability for their work, and took on leadership roles in the small groups around the classroom. This study reinforced the idea that traditional lecture methods do not work in a classroom of students who were eager to move. By allowing movement, transitions and stations in activities, students were able to approach their tasks with focus.

Cooperative learning is essential, because it allows students to direct their own learning. These strategies can be difficult to implement because teachers must ensure that authentic learning is taking place, rather than just talk.

### **Chapter Three: Methods and Procedures**

In this study, I looked at how fourth and fifth grade teachers incorporated cooperative learning activities into their work with students. I wanted to understand how the teachers thought about cooperative learning and what they believed was most beneficial in supporting students' learning in a cooperative setting.

#### **Participants**

I sent out an electronic survey (see Appendix A) to 29 teachers (14 fourth-grade teachers and 15 fifth-grade teachers) from four different schools in one school district in western New York. Of the twenty-nine teachers, nine were males (three fourth grade and six fifth grade) and twenty were females.

#### **Context of study**

The e-mailed survey consisted of nine questions that inquired about the teachers' feelings toward cooperative learning and how they incorporated cooperative learning into their classroom. The demographic portion of the survey asked the teacher to identify his or her gender, how many years of teaching experience, and the grade level currently teaching. The nine open-ended questions asked about the teachers' perspective of their classroom and if they considered it more of a traditional classroom with little cooperative learning, or if they incorporated cooperative learning practices often in their classroom. The survey asked how often the teachers incorporated cooperative learning into their classroom. The survey asked about whether or not the teachers felt their students were engaged while working with their peers. It asked about the teachers' perspective on the most essential classroom management skills they felt they needed to

possess for cooperative learning to be successful in their classroom. It also asked about the subject areas into which the teachers most often incorporated cooperative learning. It questioned how the teachers incorporated cooperative learning into their literacy instruction and whether they observed more or less social tension between the students when they incorporated cooperative learning into their instruction.

I put two New York State dollar Scratch-off Lotto tickets in each teacher's mailboxes who received a survey. I hoped by giving them the Lotto ticket, it would increase the return rate of completed surveys.

### **My Position as the Researcher**

I am a middle-class white male who during the time of the study lived in western New York. I am 29 years old and pursuing my master's degree in literacy at The College at Brockport. I received an elementary education certification from The College at Brockport in 2010. I started subbing in schools while I was still in my undergraduate program at Brockport. I have been substitute teaching in schools since receiving my bachelor's degree. I have had two long term substitute positions in my four years of substitute teaching. One of my long term substitute positions was as a response to intervention (RTI) reading teacher at a city school in western New York. I was working with small groups of students ranging from kindergarten to second grade. I was pulling small groups of students who were identified by the district as "struggling readers" and I was working on improving their reading during the thirty minutes sessions. I worked with each group three times a week; seventy students participated in the program.

The other long term substitute position I had was in the same school district in which I conducted this research study. I had a long term substitute position in a fifth grade classroom for

the first five months of school, from September to the middle of February. I was subbing for a teacher who was out on maternity leave. This was my first experience of having my own general education classroom, instructing the same kids every day. This was a very positive experience for me and I learned a lot about myself as an educator. This experience provided me with the opportunity to incorporate more cooperative learning into my instruction and to observe the benefits of its use firsthand. My educational philosophy is focused on the social aspect in the classroom. I believe that students learn best through interacting and communicating with their peers.

I recognize that it is important to establish the rules and the different roles that the students play in the classroom. Building meaningful relationships with the students is very important to me. I believe that if a student does not like someone, he or she is not going to want to learn from that person. I try to laugh with my students as often as possible and to make the learning fun by incorporating humor into my lessons. I feel that if a student looks up to me and respects me, he or she will work harder.

### **Data Collection**

I sent the surveys via e-mail and I received the completed surveys via e-mail. I also gave the teachers the option to print the survey and handwrite their responses.

### **Data Analysis**

I first separated the completed surveys by grade level, and I put all the fourth grade surveys in one pile and the fifth grade surveys in another pile. I looked at the similarities between the surveys and noted how they were similar to the other teachers at that grade level. I paid close

attention to how they incorporated cooperative learning into their classroom. I looked to see if there was a common theme that the fourth grade teachers did, compared to the fifth grade teachers. I took note of the different types of classroom management they felt was necessary in the classroom for cooperative learning to be successful. I also looked at the frequency of subjects of instruction into which the teachers were incorporating cooperative learning.

### **Procedures**

I anticipated that I would have about two thirds of the surveys back within a week of sending them out. I hoped I would receive all of the completed surveys back, but through conversations with my peers they told me otherwise. I believed that the majority of the teachers would send the surveys back via e-mail. I hoped they used detail and specific examples when responding to the questions. I thought I would see a lot of teachers that were incorporating cooperative learning into subjects like math, science, and social studies. I thought that literacy instruction would have the least amount of cooperative learning implemented into their teaching. I felt this way because often reading and writing is done independently. I was excited to see how the teachers incorporated cooperative learning into their instruction of literacy.

#### **Week One**

- Distributed surveys to teachers
- Collected completed surveys and organized them by grade level.

#### **Week Two**

- Continued to collect completed surveys
- Started to analyze and look for patterns in the surveys



### **Week Three**

- Sent out a reminder e-mail for all the teachers who did not return the completed surveys
- Continued to organize completed surveys

### **Week Four**

- Analyzed data and find common themes

### **Criteria for Trustworthiness**

The prolonged engagement of the research would be about four weeks to collect and analyze the data. Because I only used a survey as my data source, there would be no persistent observations which would focus on observations and interviews. For triangulation, I looked at the surveys. I sent out an introduction letter for the participant debriefing. The letter introduced me as a student attending The College at Brockport, it defined cooperative learning, and it introduced the purpose of my study to the teachers. The negative case analysis allowed me to look at the surveys from different perspectives and to categorize them in different types of ways. I organized the surveys by grade levels, gender of teacher, teaching experience, and schools.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are limitations that I saw occur during the study. I foresaw not all the teachers turning in their surveys, though I predicted a majority of the teachers would turn them in. Another boundary was that I was not observing classrooms that had teachers using cooperative learning activities. The sample size of the study was a limiting factor. If I had more time and resources, I could have sampled teachers from different districts/counties/states/countries. Looking at different grade levels other than fourth and fifth grade would have given me different

information as well. If I distributed the survey at a different time (either earlier/later) in the school year, more teachers may have been using cooperative learning activities.

### **Summary**

I thought the qualitative survey would give me a lot of information about how the fourth and fifth grade teachers viewed and implemented cooperative learning activities into their instruction. I asked 29 teachers to complete a 9 question survey about cooperative learning activities and how they are implemented in their classroom.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

In order to understand how elementary teachers implemented cooperative learning within their classrooms, I distributed 29 nine question surveys to elementary school teachers. I received 18 completed surveys for a return rate of 62 percent. Of the 18 participants who completed the survey 61 (11 of 18) percent were fifth grade teachers and 39 (7 of 18) percent were fourth grade teachers. Thirty-nine percent of the participants were male (7 of 18) and 61 percent of the participants were female (11 of 18). The average number of years of teaching experience for the seven fourth grade teachers was thirteen years and the average number of years of teaching experience for the eleven fifth grade teachers was 18 years.

In this chapter, I present analysis of the survey results across the participants and by the two grade levels.

### **Combined Survey Results**

One hundred percent of the teachers stated that they had the students working cooperatively either in small groups or with partners every day in the classroom. Twenty-eight percent said they had students working cooperatively with their peers only one to two times a day, fifty-six percent of teachers had the students working cooperatively three to five times a day, and seventeen percent of the participants had the students working cooperatively more than five times a day. This proved that teachers at an elementary school level not only practiced cooperative learning, but they also recognized the benefits of grouping students together in order for them to learn cooperatively.

In order for cooperative learning activities to be effective, teachers utilized specific classroom management strategies. Seventy two percent of the teachers involved in this study

agreed that clear expectations must be set in order for active learning to facilitate productive discussion rather than chattiness. These teachers believed that there were many components that are essential in establishing an engaging and effective cooperative learning environment. These were: setting specific goals, providing clear directions, articulating behavioral expectations, building a sense of community within the group, promoting cooperation between group members, defining individual roles and taking responsibility for those roles, being respectful of one another, and being able to manage time. These teachers' observations showed that the responsibility is both on the teacher and the student. The students understood their own responsibilities, and took ownership for their own learning. Teachers who established clear guidelines were best able to facilitate these types of activities in their classroom.

Cooperative learning activities reduced the social tension in the classroom. The teachers' responses stated that students felt more comfortable talking and interacting with their peers. One teacher stated, "Students feel less anxiety in a small group because there are fewer students to judge their responses." Another teacher declared, "The tension in the regular classroom increases because these students have not socially matured yet. This is more reason to use cooperative learning activities." Students felt that they were part of a team, which reduced behavior problems in the large group setting. Students were allowed to get to know each other more personally and academically. Cooperative learning allowed students to be aware of the strengths of their peers more quickly.

Despite the small challenges that several of these teachers encountered, the teachers interviewed proved that the pros far outweigh the cons of cooperative learning. There were many benefits to a cooperative classroom. According to the teachers interviewed, the major benefit that was observed was that this style increased effective communication amongst

students, as well as between teacher and student, in the classroom. Forty four percent of the teachers said that there was more active engagement in learning when students were cooperating in a group setting. This was beneficial because they were allowed to hear different perspectives from their peers. This also gave them the opportunity to share their own opinions and ideas in a more intimate setting that may have been less intimidating for some students than a whole class discussion. Other benefits that teachers observed were that students were able to build ideas off of one another, able to express their feelings about what they were learning, students served as role models and developed friendships, students solved problems more efficiently, felt a sense of belonging in a community atmosphere, demonstrated critical thinking, took accountability for their work, and were able to have their work reviewed by peers.

#### **Fourth Grade Survey Results**

There were six females and one male interviewed at the fourth grade level. The average years of experience that these teachers had were thirteen years.

#### **Benefits of Cooperative Learning Observed by Teachers**

The fourth grade teachers interviewed believe that the majority of their students were more engaged when they were working either with partners or in small groups. 61% of these teachers agreed that the students were more engaged. One female fourth grade teacher stated, “This particular class does much better if they are out of their seats, with a partner, and have a clear focus of the task. I truly believe that much of learning is social.” Another teacher was quoted as saying “Students get to bounce ideas off of each other, and this helps to deepen their understanding. If the students teach a peer something, they actually learn it better themselves.”

Another teacher pondered, “I’m not sure if the students learn ‘better,’ but I think that they enjoy working with their peers, and if they stay focused, they have pretty good discussions with their peers.” One teacher further stated, “Students are more confident to discuss what they are thinking, versus sharing their thinking aloud to a large group of peers. It also encourages the kids to compromise and work well with their peers. The kids seem to smile more, and enjoy what they are learning about. They always ask if they can work with a partner.” One more teacher stated, “It definitely depends on the student. I have done more reading lately about respecting the learning style of introverted students, and it’s important to remember that they often benefit from a more quiet, individualized activity. It’s important to provide a variety of activities so that all learning styles can be valued.” One teacher stated, “It depends on the task. Some students have difficulty focusing when they are working with other students, but most students are definitely more engaged and learn so much from their peers.” The only male fourth grade teacher interviewed observed, “I think if they are staying on topic and working together, then they learn better as a group. They are able to explain their thinking to each other and talk things out.” Similar patterns noticed between these fourth grade teachers were that, while it depended on the student, when students were able to teach their peers the material at hand, they were more apt to comprehend the subject matter. While working in groups, many students ideas were validated more so than if they were to share in the large group setting. Students developed confidence as they learned to interact with their peers.

### **Classroom Management and Grouping**

Twenty-two percent of the teachers stated that they had to choose the groupings in the classroom in order for this type of learning to be productive. If not, the groups may not have

remained focused. Fifty seven percent of the fourth grade teachers stated that within those groups, they preferred to assign roles so that each student was required to be active and accountable. The fourth grade teachers interviewed for this study observed that, when participating in cooperative learning, students were more energetic. These teachers realized that this type of learning was very beneficial when structured properly by the teacher.

One teacher stated, “In a community, we are polite and respectful. I want my students to understand that it is essential to learn to work and cooperate with each other.” Another realized that, “Teachers need to set clear expectations that the students stay focused on the learning activity. Setting specific goals, directions, and behavioral expectations are very important.” Yet another teacher stated, “Set up expectations at the beginning of the year, and classroom rules are written BY THE STUDENTS. Remind them of THEIR rules, and why it is important for the students to follow the rules. During group work, there should be a leader or a manager, who oversees the group and checks to see how everyone is doing. Sometimes, I select the group or partners, but other times I let them choose their groups. Sometimes they prefer ME to choose their partners so there are no hurt feelings.” Another teacher stated, “I think the most important management skill to have, is for the students to understand their responsibility role, and that they are part of a team.” Another teacher said, “To me, the most important management skill is helping kids define the roles of responsible learners, and helping them take ownership in their own learning.” One more teacher said that, “The most essential classroom management skill is making sure that I am respecting the students, and that the students are respecting each other.” Another teacher, in response to the most important management skill question answered, “Respect.” In other words, these teachers noticed that the students needed to have a clear understanding of what was expected of them while they were working cooperatively, and they

were responsible for their own learning and communicating effectively with their peers. The students needed to understand that when they were in small groups or with partners, they needed to stay focused on the task and it was not a time to socialize about off-topic ideas. The students were responsible for communicating effectively so they could share their ideas with their peers and learn from their peers as well.

### **Challenges of Using Cooperative Learning Activities**

In certain subject areas, fourth grade teachers still struggled to find ways of incorporating this type of learning into the daily instructions. Problems that fourth grade teachers encountered in their classrooms while attempting to implement cooperative learning were that students tended to get off topic, began to fool around, or became chatty. These teachers also observed that occasionally students would feel excluded from the small group. One female teacher in this study noticed that partner work was more effective than group work because not everyone in the small group contributed. Certain class makeups may have caused conflict as well.

### **Fifth Grade Survey Results**

At the fifth grade level, six males and five females responded to the survey. The average number of years of teaching experience between these fifth grade teachers is eighteen.

### **Benefits of Using Cooperative Learning Activities**

Teachers in the fifth grade classrooms observed many benefits to cooperative learning. The male teacher with seventeen years of experience stated, “Students benefit because they hear directly from their peers. Invested students can serve as role models for others who are not as



invested.” Another male teacher explained, “Students able to view other methods of problem solving, they are able to work together to solve problems and bounce ideas off of each other, and there is more accountability.” The third male teacher stated, “There is greater peer review with work, personal growth and group dynamics, and development of friendships.” A fifth grade female teacher emphasized that “when students work together to discover new things, this allows them to go deeper and question more.” Another fifth grade female teacher stated that cooperative learning includes developing interpersonal skills which will be required in all future jobs.” The benefits these teachers noticed in their classrooms enforce the idea that cooperative learning is important to implement in the classroom. Many of the teachers discussed the fact that cooperative learning was essential for students to learn from their peers and to develop effective communication within relationships. This type of development will not only benefit students within their individual classroom, but also begin, at a young age, preparing them for college and career readiness.

### **Classroom Management and Grouping**

The fifth grade teachers interviewed expressed a variety of ways that they individually manage the classroom to allow cooperative learning to be successful. A major benefit of this type of learning is that teachers can individualize instruction to fit their specific and diverse classroom. When asked “What is the most essential classroom management skill to implement in your classroom?” one female teacher noted, “Teacher must give responsibility to students so that they take ownership of running the classroom.” Another fifth grade female teacher observed that “There have to be very clear expectations, modeling what group work should look like, and respecting each person.” Another fifth grade female teacher said, “Careful grouping, clear

directions and expectations, frequent check ins, and good time management.” One more female teacher decided that, “Developing a sense of community and responsibility is key to classroom management, and also using positive reinforcement, and consistently reinforcing the established classroom rules.” A fifth grade male teacher believed that “proximity does a lot, and having personal connections.” The second male teacher stated that the most essential classroom management skill is “being consistent with the ground rules that you have established at the beginning of the year.” A theme amongst the fifth grade teachers’ responses about classroom management was that, when teachers and students were consistent with their expectations and had a clear understanding of what was expected while they were learning cooperatively, this type of learning can work successfully. Another theme throughout these responses was that students must take accountability for their work in order to feel a sense of ownership of what they produced, and to respect themselves and one another. These teachers were able to use cooperative learning more successfully within certain subject areas. Sixty-one percent of the fifth grade teachers incorporated cooperative learning activities into the four core subjects of math, science, English, and social studies. Social studies and science were found to have the highest cooperative learning activities incorporated into the curriculum by the participants. The fifth grade teachers interviewed were most likely to incorporate cooperative learning into social studies and science. While these teachers chose to use cooperative learning within their social studies and science instruction the most, all core subject areas benefitted from this type of learning.

### **Different Strategies**

These fifth grade teachers utilized a number of different active learning strategies in their classrooms. Seventy-two percent of the participants perceived reading with a partner and

discussing what they just read with their partner, as the best way to incorporate cooperative learning activities into their literacy instruction. Seventy-three percent of the fifth grade teachers said they established reading groups in their classroom and had the students read as a group and discuss what they just read. There were roles that each student needed to fill for the group to be successful. Five out of the eighteen teachers used peer editing between their students. Some teachers used writing partners as well as reader's theatre to incorporate literacy into cooperative learning activities. One teacher used white boards in their classroom. This is called a "365 degree classroom." The way this teacher used the white boards was that they had the children write questions on the white boards, and students then moved around the room to answer their peers' questions by writing the answers on the white boards. By using this strategy, teachers were promoting the sharing of ideas between peers in an active and respectful way. Other strategies that teachers used to incorporate cooperative learning activities were: sharing with the whole class, comparing evidence, partner book reviews, peer share, and peer assessment.

### **Challenges with Using Cooperative Learning Activities**

I asked the fifth grade teachers to reflect on both the positives and negatives of using cooperative learning. One male fifth grade teacher said that "I feel they do not always learn better with their peers when they become distracted and off task." Another male fifth grade teacher stated that "it depends on the material, but cooperative learning can sometimes lead to kids that are not engaged and fooling around more than anything else." These teachers realized the importance of properly planned guidelines, models of tasks, strategic grouping and expectations, in order for students to stay focused and on task. One female teacher observed that "it depends on the task, or the partner or group." According to one teacher, "for some learners,

partner work can be distracting. Students need supervision.” One theme I detected amongst the problems witnessed by these teachers was that students could easily get off task if they were not supervised, and when the expectations were not clear. As with many classroom activities, teachers assessed the class, and the specific type of learners, in order to choose the best type of cooperative learning activity. When structured clearly, students developed respect for their peers through the process of group communication.

### **Summary**

I believe the teacher surveys were an excellent way of understanding how fourth and fifth grade teachers incorporate cooperative learning activities into their classrooms. I was able to understand their perspectives on cooperative learning and interpret each teacher's management style for building a classroom that involved cooperative learning activities. The survey allowed me to perceive different perspectives on whether or not the teachers thought the cooperative learning activities helped build a more social community in their classrooms.

Through the surveys I was able to understand different strategies that the fourth and fifth grade teachers used to incorporate cooperative learning activities. Each teacher used different strategies to incorporate cooperative learning activities, but overall they had a positive perception of building a more social interactive classroom. The teachers' overall response was that strong management skills were necessary in the classroom and the students needed to know what was expected of them for cooperative learning to be successful. Often the fourth and fifth grade teachers had to pick the groups of students when the students were working cooperatively in the classroom. One female fourth grade teacher indicated that the students needed to “have a clear

understanding of what is expected of them while they are working cooperatively; they are responsible for their own learning and communicating effectively with their peers.”

Overall, I believe the teachers observed that the students benefited from learning cooperatively with their peers. In order for cooperative learning to be successful the students needed to be aware of what was expected of them while they were working with their peers.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations**

Through analysis of both the findings from my own teacher survey, as well as the academic information I synthesized in the process, my belief that cooperative learning is beneficial in the classroom was supported. As primary school teacher Kate Ferguson- Patrick states in her Newcastle Article, “Cooperative learning is a strategy that considers both student’s academic and social outcomes. It develops positive relationships and helps to manage conflict so cooperative classrooms are likely to be harmonious and democratic.” (Ferguson- Patrick, 2012, p1). In other words, a classroom that utilizes cooperative learning will run more smoothly and effectively. Students will gain and practice respect toward one another through positive relationships and working in small groups.

### **Summary of the Research Questions**

I explored two research questions:

What do fourth and fifth grade teachers see as the benefits of incorporating cooperative learning activities into their work with students?

How do fourth and fifth grade teachers in western New York incorporate cooperative learning into their work with students?

I surveyed 18 fourth and fifth grade teachers at four elementary schools in western New York in order to gain a better understanding of how cooperative learning was practiced in the classroom, and whether these strategies were efficient. I will discuss with you some of the activities that I perceived were beneficial in these fourth and fifth grade classrooms. The majority of the teachers and students in these western NY State Schools had a positive perspective on cooperative learning within their classroom. Teachers used many different

strategies to incorporate cooperative learning, and tried to meet the needs of all learners in their class. I discovered that in order for cooperative learning to work effectively in the classroom, the environment must contain five specific components. These are: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face to face interaction, interpersonal or small group social skills, and group processing. Cooperative learning helps students develop these skills so that they are able to function efficiently and productively both inside and outside of the classroom. Through cooperative learning activities at an elementary school level, students will be able to practice and perform these skills.

## **Conclusions**

### **Students Learn Positive Interdependence Through Cooperative Learning**

Students will participate in positive interdependence in order for cooperative learning to be effective. I believe that cooperative learning benefits each student individually within the whole group. This allows students to gain a better understanding of the curriculum because students are not only learning from their teachers, but from their peers as well, and being given the opportunity to teach their peers. Cooperative learning activities allow students to look at problems from the perspective of their peers, which may be easier to understand than the way the teacher previously provided the information. Understanding that the grades of their peers are dependent on their individual effort motivates students to put forth more effort than they may have individually. Working with others creates a sense of camaraderie, which transfers into a communal positive attitude in the classroom, as well as positive individual relationships. Through my survey, teachers who were interviewed explained that students were more productive while working in small groups and sharing their thoughts and answers with one

another. Students observed by the teachers at this specific western New York elementary school were excited and engaged when they were able to work closely with their peers, and direct the own path of their learning.

### **Students Take Individual Accountability When Learning Cooperatively**

Students will be able to take individual accountability for their work within the group setting of cooperative learning. Under the right circumstances, cooperative learning should work. Firm guidelines must be established in the classroom, and students must understand that they are accountable for their work no matter what size the group. Students must understand that they need to stay on task and stay focused while working in small groups. In order for cooperative learning to benefit the students, students must understand the expectations of what they are being asked to do. In the survey that I conducted, one teacher specifically noted that, “there is more accountability, especially when jobs were assigned.” Another teacher believed that “student jobs give responsibility for running the classroom.” This proved that students do take pride in their work through cooperative learning, and that when they felt a sense of ownership within their environment, they were more apt to work towards success.

### **Students Improve Their Face-to-Face Interactions, Group Processing and Interpersonal Skills During Cooperative Learning Time**

Students will demonstrate their ability to interact face to face with one another, and practice their small group communication skills and processing within a group atmosphere. When managed correctly, the sense of community that is cultivated in small groups is beneficial to all learners in the classroom. Through the process of these interviews, it was apparent that there was less social tension in the classrooms when students were engaged actively with one



another and with their teachers. Students were required to learn how to cooperate, problem solve, and communicate effectively with their peers when they were required to actively engage with one another. This allowed students to build more meaningful relationships with their classmates and their teachers. Cultivating these types of relationships helped students recognize the strengths of their peers, and taught them how to work in a team where each individual was valued and actively participated. “Group members are responsible for learning what is taught, and for helping teammates learn as well.” (Pepper, Blackwell, Monroe, Coskey, 2012, p2). In other words, students need to work as a team to problem solve in order to reach a common goal.

### **Implications for Student Learning**

#### **Students Have Opportunities to Develop Effective Communication Skills**

Through the process of cooperative learning activities, students are required to communicate with one another. Becoming an effective communicator is essential when students work with partners or groups, because they must communicate their thoughts clearly regarding the work at hand, and in order to deepen their comprehension of the task. Cooperative learning activities will allow students to practice those communication skills that they will need in the career world, and this will allow them to become effective communicators.

#### **Students Have Opportunities to Develop Effective Problem Solving Skills**

Many students never develop proper problem-solving skills, and continually struggle as they progress through grade levels. According to Rita and Kenneth Dunn’s research on perceptual strengths, “underachievers in both studies achieved significantly better results with tactual Electroboards, Flip Chutes, Pic-A-Holes, and Task Cards- all of which required

manipulation and problem solving, but could be used while sprawling in either their seats or on the floor.....After students have experienced using these hands-on materials, they gradually should begin creating their own, either in class or as homework assignments to review information.” (Dunn and Dunn, 2005, p273-274). In other words when students are encouraged to strategically problem solve on their own, they can drive their learning and reviewing of the material. Students who developed these problem-solving skills within their small groups were more prepared for their assessments. As Kaye Pepper, Sarah Blackwell, Anne Monroe and Shawn Coskey discovered through their study of the transfer of active learning strategies into the classroom, “The results of the study showed that the students involved in the role plays and collaborative activities did better on a standard assessment of knowledge than their peers taught through a traditional lecture technique.” (Pepper, Blackwell, Monroe, Coskey, 2005, p2).

### **Students Have Opportunities to Contribute to Their Own and Their Peers’ Learning**

I discovered through the surveys in which the majority of the teachers participated felt that their students became more likely to contribute to the sense of community in the small group and classroom while they were using cooperative learning activities in their instruction. Bertucci, Conte, Johnson, and Johnson state “there is considerable evidence that more social support is experienced (academically and personally) from peers and teachers in cooperative than in individualistic and competitive situations.” (Bertucci, Conte, Johnson and Johnson,2012, p331). Through cooperative learning activities students are required to communicate with one another, which allow them to get to know each other better not only academically but also socially. In my survey, teachers said they observed students contributing more to the conversation or learning task when they were working in small groups or with a partner, compared to how much

those students contributed in a whole group or traditional lecture style classroom. This type of academic communication in the small group or partner work perpetuated more of a social atmosphere in the classroom that lead to a less judgmental environment.

### **Implications for My Teaching**

#### **Setting Clear Expectations Engages and Focuses Learners**

As I reflect on the research, as well as my goals and objectives as an educator down the line, I recognize the imperativeness of setting clear expectations for all classroom activities. Through my research, the importance of structure and clear guidelines in all activities became apparent. As I create my units and lessons, I will begin with the expectation portion to ensure that my students are not left in the dark, and that they understand the standard of rigor that I expect from them. I will make sure that my students understand the expectations of working in small groups before they begin working in small groups. To ensure that students take accountability for their work, I will discuss expectations with them beforehand and give students the opportunity for student driven goals. As Angela Hennessey and Rylee A. Dionigi (2013) noted through their research of Generalist teachers' perspectives in implementing cooperative learning," Teachers' cooperative learning knowledge affected the way they perceived and managed factors such as student's age, and class size, student behavior, teacher control, and planning. This study recognized that teachers who have a better understanding of not only the benefits of cooperative learning, but also the necessity of setting clear expectations for students, were more capable of running these types of activities effectively.

## **Cultivating a Sense of Classroom Community**

Cooperative learning shifts the responsibility to the students. This gives them more say in the rules that are created. When the students are allowed to partake in creating the rules and expectations of the classroom, I feel they will be more likely to abide by them. Cooperative learning promotes socialization in the classroom, which allows students to get to know one another better. Hopefully, students will build a strong and respectful bond between them, both personally and academically. As I develop as a professional and educator, I would like to implement student driven thought and work into a classroom, and study the effects that I personally observe. I would like to eliminate the competitiveness in the classroom, and help all students feel equal, and not judged based on merely their scores. I would like to create a close sense of community within my classroom.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

If I were to research this topic further, there are many things I would enhance and change. To begin, I would like to conduct an experiment of my own regarding cooperative learning strategies in an actual classroom, rather than rely solely on the interviews of other teachers. At the time that I began this study, I did not have my own classroom in which to practice cooperative learning strategies. Ideally, I would have been able to conduct this study with students who I had been working with all year. As I constructed this thesis, I realized I had many more questions I would have liked to include in the interview that I distributed to these fourth and fifth grade teachers. As I continue to observe and practice these types of strategies in classrooms of my own, there are many things that I would like to look for and implement. I

understand more about the difficulties and feasibility that implementing cooperative learning activities on a daily basis. I would like to research whether the amount of resources granted to these teachers played a role in their ability to implement these types of activities. I would also factor in how the demographic of the classroom and how each student's home life plays a role in classroom activities. I would like to observe whether the advantages in cooperative learning benefitted lower level learners, or underachievers, more than average students. I would like to test specific ways in which students take more accountability for the work that they do, and to find out specifically how this accountability is observed and recorded. In future research, I would like to compare a suburban classroom to an urban classroom, in order to observe how cooperative learning is utilized, the priority it takes in the classroom, and the tools needed to ensure its effectiveness. I would also like to understand the differences between introverted and extroverted student learners, and their optimal learning setting. While this study enforced for me that cooperative learning has profound benefits in the classroom, I also realize the importance of differentiated learning so that each individual student is engaged and working toward their highest potential.

### **Final Thoughts**

While the research I found proved that cooperative learning is valued and utilized in classrooms internationally, the interviews I conducted acted to further prove how cooperative learning is developing in the specific western NY region where this study was performed. My similar findings show that students in all types of school districts benefited from cooperative learning. Cooperative learning is an evolving strategy that is continually tested and practiced in

the field. This is implemented in different ways due to a variety of needs of students, and different classroom dynamics.

There are many strategies to implement in order to practice cooperative learning. Through my study, I discovered that teachers needed to set clear expectations in order for students to gain perspectives from their peers. Teachers who I interviewed incorporated more active learning through communication that acted to build and enforce teamwork and positive attitudes towards learning in the classroom. These teachers explained that they noticed less social tension in their classrooms when their students regularly worked cooperatively. These teachers used a variety of activities to incorporate cooperative learning into their classroom. This included partner read and discuss, literature groups, peer editing, writing discussions, writing partners, and group writing. Students learned not only the skills taught by the teacher, but demonstrated higher self-esteem when they worked in groups where their opinions were valued, and they gained social skills that were aligned with these types of group activities. Students showed a higher achievement rate when working cooperatively. Through my scientific research and interviews conducted, my opinion that cooperative learning is beneficial in the classroom was supported. Not only did I discover evidence that clearly linked higher achievement levels to cooperative classroom learning, but I also discovered a variety of strategies and activities, which enabled cooperative learning to benefit both students and teachers on a daily and continual basis.

As Ozlem Olgun recognizes in his research article about engaging elementary teachers with active learning methods, “All humans also have the ability to self-regulate. As educators, we do not want students asking us every question that comes to mind. Rather, we want students to think for themselves, making prudent decisions. This is what they, too, want. They do not

want to be told what to do, nor do they want to lose control. Students have an ability to get along and relate comfortably with others, and they want to do so. They do not want to be rejected or feel isolated. Finally, all students have a sense of awareness. They have the ability to be alert, observant, attentive. Indeed, it is their very nature to avoid boredom. Educators want students to stay alert and aware.” (Olgun, 2009, p115). In other words, when teachers were able to access the strengths in socialization and decision making that already came naturally to students, students would feel more comfortable in the classroom, and felt that the material was more accessible. When students felt in control and accountable for their work and for their actions, their sense of teamwork and community developed.

In conclusion, cooperative learning is beneficial in many ways. This point was proven true through eighteen interviews and numerous research articles. While this study did not extend outside of New York State, the conclusions I was able to draw enforced the idea that cooperative learning not only engaged students more than lecture style instruction, but also helped to cultivate a respectful and driven learning environment.

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## Appendix A: Survey

March 12, 2014

Dear Teachers:

My name is Buddy Nyhof. I am a substitute teacher here in the XYZ Central School District First, I would like to thank you very much for your time and assistance and also the opportunity to work with you. I am a native of (this community) and love working with each and every one of you! I am working on my masters at The College at Brockport, SUNY and I am researching how teachers incorporate cooperative learning and movement into the classroom. I ask that you take a few minutes to complete the survey on the next page.

The survey questions asked about how you actively involve your students in cooperative learning activities. I would like to define that before you begin the survey, so we are all on the same page. Cooperative learning involves students engaging with other students in a learning activity or experiences.

If you have any questions about this, please feel free to contact me and I would be more than happy to talk with you. My phone number is and my e-mail is [Wnyho1@u.brockport.edu](mailto:Wnyho1@u.brockport.edu)  
Thank you so much for your time!! If you could return it to me ASAP, that would be a big help!

Thank You,

Buddy Nyhof

## Survey Questions

Grade taught \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Number of years teaching \_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you consider your class more of a kinesthetic classroom or traditional classroom, and why?
2. On average how many times a day are your students working together (partners or small group)?
3. Do your students seem to stay more engaged when they are working with partners or small groups?
4. Do you feel your students learn better when they are actively working with their peers, how?
5. What is the most essential classroom management skill to implement into your classroom for a successful cooperative learning atmosphere?
6. What are some of the benefits of a cooperative learning atmosphere?
7. What subjects do you usually incorporate cooperative learning into your teaching?
8. How do you incorporate cooperative learning into literacy?
9. Is there less social tension in the classroom due to cooperative learning, why, how?