

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT  
THROUGH GROUPWORK IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

by

Dannie Parke

A Project Submitted to the Faculty of  
The Evergreen State College  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree  
Master in Teaching

2015

The Project for the Master in Teaching Degree

by

Dannie Parke

has been approved for

The Evergreen State College

by

---

Lester Krupp, M.A., Member of the Faculty

## ABSTRACT

Many kindergarten and first-grade students enter formal schooling with minimal social and emotional skills. Designed to support creation of a student-centered classroom culture, this action research project examines groupwork as a teaching practice to support young learners in developing social and emotional skills. The study investigates specific aspects of the teacher's role, such as the function of group structures, facilitation strategies, and the influence of status upon group dynamics. Findings center on two major areas: students' awareness of interdependence and students' ability to identify needs. Research data confirms significant development of social and emotional skills in both areas.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I received my acceptance letter from the Master in Teaching (MiT) Program at The Evergreen State College, I accepted with determination, passion, and enthusiasm.

The work of my action research project began in year one and has been the biggest challenge of this program. There were tears of frustration and moments where my determination was lost, but for those who stood by my side with great support and love, I thank you.

My faculty of the 2013-2015 cohort was a great support. Specifically, Lester who worked with me side-by-side over summer and into year two assisted me in finding my determination when I have felt it was lost. I thank my partner, Tyler, who has not only supported my process with this paper but has supported me in completing this program. There were many late nights of working and with Tyler's support, he made the impossible seem possible by simple words of wisdom: "If anyone can do this, you can. You can do it." Those words would repeat in my head as I revised, revised, and revised. Lastly, I want to thank my incredible family and Tyler's family for their ongoing support. This would not have been possible without your help, support, and positive words.

## Table of Contents

<b>CHAPTER 1: GROUPWORK IN PRIMARY GRADES .....</b>	<b>1</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	1
REVIEW OF RESEARCH: COOPERATIVE LEARNING .....	4
IMPLEMENTATION OF GROUPWORK IN PRIMARY GRADES .....	7
STATUS .....	13
STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF GROUPWORK .....	13
IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING STATUS .....	17
<b>CHAPTER 2: ACTION RESEARCH ON GROUPWORK .....</b>	<b>23</b>
RESEARCH DATA AND ANALYSIS .....	23
PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING .....	24
IN ACTION: CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH .....	28
LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH .....	36
<b>CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS .....</b>	<b>41</b>
MY LENS IN THE ACTION RESEARCH .....	41
RESEARCH ACTION .....	42
RESEARCH FINDINGS .....	44
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS .....	53
IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH .....	54
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>58</b>

## CHAPTER 1: GROUPWORK IN PRIMARY GRADES

### Introduction

Sunny Mountain Elementary<sup>1</sup> is located in a small city in Western Washington. The school is an alternative elementary school, and families in the district have the option of sending their child to this school rather than their neighborhood school; entrance is by lottery. The philosophy of the school embodies a social justice perspective on teaching. The goal is to make learning relevant and meaningful in students' lives. According to the school's website, the philosophy asserts that "the purpose of education in the options program is to develop in young people the knowledge, skills, and disposition to become active participants in a democratic society working towards a just and caring sustainable global community" (Sunny Mountain Elementary Website).

The school is located in a residential area close to office buildings and other local businesses. The school has an enrollment of 300 students, with a large waiting list every school year. The school serves kindergarten through fifth grade; 86% of students are Caucasian and 30% of students receive free-or-reduced lunch. On a larger scale, the school district serves over 9,000 students from pre-school through grade twelve.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym name is used for the school where the action research was conducted.

## **Philosophy of Sunny Mountain Elementary**

The teachers at Sunny Mountain enact the school's philosophy by their design of activities and projects in multiple disciplines. The projects cultivate social and emotional awareness through the community involvement in which students participate. The students' final projects demonstrate their developing knowledge of social justice and appreciation for diversity.

I conducted my research in a multi-age classroom composed of kindergarten and first grade students. My mentor teacher, Anne, recognizes the importance of creating curricula that can be accessed by students who vary in their academic, social, and emotional level. Her lessons embody the school-wide philosophy, and she attempts to meet the needs of all individuals through cooperative learning. Anne's design of groups is based on which students will support one another in their social and emotional wellbeing, working to create a positive and successful learning experience for all students.

## **Cooperative Learning in the Classroom**

Anne fosters choice in how students work within cooperative learning. In particular learning activities, Anne provides specific tasks for each group member, whereas in other activities, students are given choice. During mathematics, Anne will have a central focus, but within that specific focus students are provided with different options in what activity they complete as a group. In reading, Anne arranges reading buddies, each group chooses

what books they read and where in the classroom they want to settle in and read. These particular examples illustrate how cooperative learning is implemented in the multi-age classroom.

The structure of the classroom is set up to support collaborative learning. Rather than individual desks, the classroom has tables with four or five seats per table. Each table has one *table manager*, and this role rotates to a new student each day. Because each member in the table group is assigned the role for one day during the school week, there is an equal amount of participation of each group member as the table manager. Their responsibility for the day is to gather the materials for the different activities. All materials are stored in various areas around the classroom and because of this, students often rely on the table manager to begin the learning activity.

Students feel honored and entitled when it is their day to be the table manager. This is one example of how students rely on one another in their collaborative learning activities. The table manager role validates how students are given opportunities to be recognized in their table groups. This is one of many ways the classroom environment supports students in their social, emotional, and academic development. The multi-age classroom includes a three-year age-range, and to be responsive to all students, the teacher has created specific ways to support all students and their individual needs.

Prior to conducting my action research, I had observed in many classrooms and had two different internships, all of which were in elementary

classroom settings. Through these experiences, my interest in groupwork in primary grades grew as I witnessed infrequent and inconsistency in implementing the practice in primary classrooms. Because I wanted to learn more about groupwork and the ways cooperative learning can positively affect children's development of social and emotional skills, my action research focused on better understanding how the implementation of cooperative learning can effectively support young children in developing social and emotional skills.

Much of the research on collaborative learning has primarily focused on academic achievement as the outcome measure. In this action research project, I will focus on the ways in which cooperative learning supports the social and emotional development of children in the primary grades. Therefore, my research question is: How does cooperative learning in primary grades support students' development of social and emotional skills?

### **Review of Research: Cooperative Learning**

Research in cooperative learning has shown benefits over a wide variety of educational goals such as student achievement (Stevens & Slavin, 1995), students' perceptions of themselves as learners (Dekker, Elshout-Mohr, & Wood, 1996; Wiegel, 1998), and students' interactions with their peers (Blumenfeld, Krajcik, Marx, & Solloway, 1996; Yackel, Cobb, & Wood, 1991). As educators, we need to anticipate that our students will vary in their academic, social, and emotional capacities. The structure of cooperative learning has the potential to foster rich and valuable experiences for all

students. One of the many ways research has suggested to foster an enriching learning environment for all students is through the implementation of heterogeneous groups in cooperative learning activities (Cohen, 1994).

Research has pointed to the benefits of creating heterogeneous groups. Heterogeneous groupings provide the space for students to listen, share, and act out their ideas collaboratively (Cohen, 1994; Slavin, 1987b). The power struggles between students are minimized in heterogeneous groups because individual students are not recognized as having high or low status. Status is defined as the hierarchal dynamics created within a group of people, where some members are more active and influential than others. Cohen (1994) further explains “*status-ordering* is an agreed-upon social ranking where everyone feels that it is better to have a high rank within the status order than a low rank” (p. 23).

Heterogeneous groups can offer a space for students to become confident in sharing their thought processes and using their group members as intellectual resources. If a group member does not understand, she can ask her peers questions to clarify the process. The student who is asking questions may not completely understand, but articulating questions provides learning opportunities for every group member. In heterogeneous groups, students can become comfortable in questioning and challenging one another in a respectful way. Cooperative learning experiences based on heterogeneous groups have the potential to support all learners in a multi-age classroom (Slavin, 1987a; Wiegel, 1998).

Multi-age classrooms cultivate a unique experience for students, who often loop with the teacher, staying with the same teacher for two years. Spending two years with one teacher supports cooperative learning in a primary classroom. The implementation and effective use of cooperative learning takes time. Over time, the success and rich experiences in cooperative learning are amplified because students will have a foundation for what is expected in groupwork.

The success of collaborative groupwork relies on clear expectations of how students can interact with one another when working collaboratively to create a safe, healthy, and productive learning experience. Anne and her students collaboratively create classroom agreements at the beginning of the year, and students are held accountable for their behavior and their actions toward one another. When students work collaboratively, the classroom agreements are frequently revisited to remind students how they should treat their group members and what their individual responsibilities are as members in the learning community. The technique of implementing classroom agreements supports students' ability to self-monitor their own behaviors. Classroom agreements also promote equity within the learning environment because all individuals are held accountable to behave and treat one another in a particular manner (Wiegel, 1998). Research suggests that when teachers explicitly address and enact rules or agreements, students' behaviors during collaborative learning are more positive,

supportive of student learning, and supportive of the interactions between students during collaborative activities (Cohen, 1994; Slavin, 1987a).

### **Implementation of Groupwork in Primary Grades**

Primary teachers face challenges in allowing space for meaningful groupwork, especially because collaborative learning can be quite different from more traditional, teacher-centered classroom lessons (Slavin, 1950). There are positive outcomes in allowing groups to work collaboratively, without the teacher being the center of the activities. Students develop skills to self-regulate and monitor their own learning and participation (Dekker et al., 1996). Cooperative learning is time consuming, requiring consistency and patience. While introducing cooperative learning, the teacher needs to maintain consistency of the expectations and structure to support students, especially primary students. When students begin experiencing cooperative learning during the first years of formal schooling, the structure becomes normal to their understanding of what schooling is, with foundational skills developed. If students can experience cooperative learning early in their education, discussion, collaboration, and verbal problem-solving processes become normal, comfortable, and beneficial for students (Tarim, 2009; Wilkinson, 1989).

### **Groupwork Supports Social and Emotional Skill Development**

Though collaborative learning is time consuming at the beginning of the school year, students' comfort in verbal participation increases when teachers are deliberate with their structure of groupwork. Tarim (2009) used

mixed methods to analyze three Turkish kindergarten classrooms using observations, interviews, and pre- and posttests. The purpose of this thirteen-week study was to understand cooperative learning and its effects in a mathematical context. Tarim and researchers analyzed students' verbal problem-solving skills in different classroom contexts.

The study was conducted in three kindergarten classrooms in Turkish private schools, including fifty-four students. The parents of the students were university graduates who were doctors, teachers, engineers, and nurses. Each classroom involved in the study included a general teacher and an assistant teacher. The general teachers had an average of twelve years of teaching experience prior to the study. Included in the study were two experimental classrooms and one control. To begin the study Tarim's (2009) researchers interviewed the teachers in each of the classrooms to understand how they defined groupwork and to learn how the teachers utilized cooperative learning in their classrooms. The teachers of the two experimental classrooms attended a five-hour workshop, which addressed the cooperative learning methods they would implement in their classrooms.

The cooperative groupwork program implemented in the experimental groups focused on improving students' mathematical abilities by employing cooperative learning activities. The math curriculum used included thirteen different sections of activities including math computation appropriate for kindergarten students. The long-term goal in the study was for students to have the skills to work collaboratively in five-person groups, however, the

study began with students working in groups of two to scaffold and teach students how to work collaboratively. The classrooms began math with whole-group instruction by the teacher providing instructions and the expectations for that specific activity, after which students were dismissed to work in their collaborative groups.

Researchers analyzed the cooperative learning activities by observing the lesson activities for one hour. During the observations, there was no use of a standard instrument, but the observers took notes on all of the behaviors in an unstructured observation. Observations were used as a way to analyze cooperative learning without disturbing the flow and natural occurrences of the classroom. Interviews were conducted between the researchers and each of the classroom teachers. The interviews included questions about the teachers' perspective on cooperative learning in a kindergarten classroom. Content analysis was used to code the observational notes in the time of research. The interviews were transcribed and a similar process was completed using content analysis.

Through the process of coding interviews and observations, researchers found that cooperative learning supported students' development in their ability to cooperate, share, and engage in cognitive behaviors. Pre- and posttests were used to compare the control and experimental groups' academic improvements over the span of the study. Students in the experimental classrooms earned higher grades on the posttest, with the researchers concluding that the groupwork activities had an

effect on students' overall cognitive understanding of the material. Tarim's (2009) researchers concluded through the analysis of the data that students were able to test out their ideas and receive feedback from their peers immediately, allowing students to rely on their peers for support during the learning process prior to taking an assessment that would assess their understanding of the material.

Tarim's (2009) study included experimental and control groups, which strengthened validity because the researchers were able to compare the outcomes of the two groups for their findings of the study. The internal and external validity were also strong because the research study was created a study that was dependable of the consistency between the control and experimental group. Tarim's (2009) researchers used the same methods and pre- and posttests for both the control and experimental classrooms. Therefore, I have confidence in this study because the design of the study used the same instruments in both groupings, which creates a strong set of data to analyze, subsequent with solid findings and conclusions. Tarim's (2009) use of mixed-methods strengthened the reliability and objectivity by providing more than test results or observations in the discussion about cooperative learning being an effective approach for primary grades in mathematics. Because groupwork is multifaceted, teachers can methodically develop a system for groupwork in which the engineering of groupwork is planned and designed by the teacher, and students become familiar with the components as the class is introduced to groupwork.

## **Expectations in Cooperative Learning**

Experiences in cooperative learning can be positively reinforced if teachers communicate with students the expectations during groupwork. When students understand the expectations, their ability to collaborate and to work through challenges with one another increases. Students' social and emotional skills develop through their experiences in working collaboratively, and explicit communication of expectations is an important aspect of learning to work together (Steven & Slavin, 1995; Yackel, et al., 1991).

Researchers suggest that teachers should begin introducing and teaching expectations at the beginning of the year, providing students the opportunity to practice the expectations (Bertucci, Conte, Johnson, & Johnson, 2012). Cohen (1994) suggests students begin the school year by learning and practicing cooperation, responsiveness to others, and participation. Those group expectations may be different from those in more traditional classroom activities, but they are essential expectations for successful collaborative learning experiences. Some of these expectations can be taught and practiced through community-building activities. Beginning the school year with such activities can help students learn what is expected of them in the classroom and how they will treat one another during collaborative learning activities (Stevens and Slavin, 1995).

Groupwork is intended to provide students with opportunities to work with others and learn from their peers. Researchers have conducted studies showing that collaborative learning can be a highly effective method of

instruction. For example, Stevens and Slavin (1995) and Berry (2006) both found positive outcomes from the implementation of groupwork. Studies have shown that students' academic achievement increased when groupwork was implemented in classrooms (Tarim, 1995). Researchers attributed the increase in achievement to the fact that students were actively engaged in the learning process (Battistich, Solomon, & Delucchi, 1993; Johnson, 2006). Slavin (1950) acknowledged that cooperative learning supports students' academics and extended his studies to address the ways in which groupwork can support students' social and emotional development. Slavin emphasized the following social and emotional skills: communication skills, social sensitivity, responsiveness to others, active listening and empathy, and the ability to be flexible. Slavin (1950) asserted that many skills develop through groupwork, and argued that it is important to begin groupwork in the first part of the school year and have groupwork as common practice in the classroom. The normalcy of groupwork will provide students the time and space to develop skills through repeated experiences. Cooperative learning has the potential to create a space for students to develop those skills through activities of collaborating with classmates, learning how to participate successfully, and taking into account the group's needs and desires.

## **Status**

Cohen and Lotan (1995) argued groupwork to be effective when teachers are deliberate in their effort towards minimizing the status issues that exist within any classroom. Status is best defined as how student's expectations of themselves and others influence their perceptions of their own competence and the competence of their group members.

In cooperative learning, the ultimate goal of groupwork is for students to work together, in a group that is size appropriate, providing the space and opportunity for all students to actively engage and participate in the task (Cohen, 1994). While designing a system for groupwork, teachers can consider how their structures reinforce status issues or will address the issues and dismantle the gap between low- and high-status individuals.

### **Structural Aspects of Groupwork**

My action research project focused on primary grades, examining how cooperative learning supports students' development of social and emotional skills. There is little research that addresses and verifies how cooperative learning can support young children in their development of social and emotional skills. However, research that is general about the implementation of cooperative learning in preschool through high school contributes to the understanding of how complex cooperative learning is, providing a foundation of understanding for cooperative learning in primary grades. The complexities of cooperative learning begin with the teacher who is planning to implement cooperative learning within her practice.

## **Teacher's Role During Groupwork Activities**

The structural aspects of groupwork are important to consider when creating and planning how teachers implement collaborative learning in their classroom. An example is how the teacher will facilitate and participate during groupwork activities. Research suggests the importance in the teacher's role in groupwork-oriented classrooms, and that this role differs from the role of a teacher in a traditional classroom (Berry, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004). When teachers plan for groupwork activities, the teachers' role during the activity alters from a facilitator to supporting groups' processes by asking questions, challenging students' thinking, and observing the discussions of students (Mandel and Smith, 1990; Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004; Yackel et al., 1991). The ability to step back as a teacher and allow students the space to work and process collaboratively requires the teacher to believe and have confidence in students' abilities (Dekker, et al., 1996; Good, Grouws, & Mason, 1990; Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004). When a teacher implements cooperative learning in the classroom, this shift in the teacher's role will enrich the experiences for students during the groupwork activities.

Groupwork is primarily student-centered, which allows students to learn with and from their group members. For the most successful experiences, students need to be given the space and the time to work with their group members with minimal interference from the teacher (Littrell &

Peterson, 2002). An example of student-centered groupwork is when students have a question or concern, but rather than immediately raising their hand for a teacher's interference, students rely on their group members to answer their question or resolve the concern. The significance in students asking their group before the teacher is that it requires the group to work through problems collaboratively. When teachers allow students to be their own facilitators in groupwork, those student actions can have a positive effect on students' development of skills through the process of learning how to collaborate and work through issues without an adult present to direct the group (Cohen, Lotan, Arellano, & Scarloss 1999; Dekker et al., 1996).

### **Students' Responsibilities in Groups**

Because teachers establish expectations about individuals' responsibility to a group when working in groupwork, there is significance in teachers providing space for groups to work collaboratively. Teachers may find it challenging or uncomfortable in this shift of their role during groupwork, however, Cohen (1994) offers insight on ways to successfully begin by explaining the delegation of authority. Delegation of the teacher's authority involves giving instructions to groups about the assigned activities, after which students work together to complete the activities rather than the teacher using direct supervision during cooperative learning activities.

In their planning of groupwork structures, teachers need to diligently design a system for groupwork in which students' responsibilities during groupwork are clear and accessible for all learners. Cohen's (1994)

research and studies about groupwork clearly suggest that teachers communicate with students their responsibilities as a group member, including “how [students] ought to behave and...act to enforce these behaviors on others” (p. 93), which she calls *norms*. Because teachers explicitly explain to students how they will be responsible to work through the activities and challenges together, students develop communication skills and acquire the ability to understand how others should be treated in groupwork (Emmer & Gerwels, 2002; McNair, 2000).

Students can be taught how to respond to their group members when there is an issue by clearly teaching expectations of cooperative learning (Cohen, Lotan, & Leechor, 1989; Dekker et al., 1996). Students learn how to handle challenging situations with their groups when teachers have created an environment that has clear and understood expectations to follow. Wilkinson (1989) discusses the importance of implementing expectations at the start of the school year. He specifically expresses how young students in particular need the consistency of practicing from the first day of school.

The teacher can support students through the process of learning these expectations by practicing specific ways of acting, including how groups should look and sound during groupwork. When the teacher plans the structure of groupwork prior to students entering the classroom on the first day of school, students will begin to experience groupwork early in the school year, promoting an environment that fosters collaboration within the classroom community (Wiegel, 1998). Bertucci, Conti, Johnson, and

Johnson (2012) offer suggestions about introducing the expectations at the beginning of the school year through community-building activities, including ones of social interdependence, equal participation, and fostering cooperative—rather than competitive—experiences.

Through the implementation of expectations, teachers can create group roles that hold students accountable during groupwork activities. When these are introduced at the beginning of the school year, students become comfortable in each role created by the teacher. There has been success in both heterogeneous and homogenous groups in cooperative learning. Regardless of the way teachers choose to organize groups, research recommends that there is a consistent system in place prior to students entering the classroom on the first day of school (Blumenfeld et al., 1996; Wiegel, 1998).

### **Importance of Addressing Status**

Roles in groupwork are used as a way to distribute and promote equitable participation for all students (Cohen, 1994; Esmonde, 2009). Group roles are established for students to self-monitor their participation in their group's process by assigning different roles to each group member. Group roles hold students accountable because each student in a group is assigned a different role, which means each individual has a role to play and is crucial in the success of the group (Stevens & Slavin, 1995; Wilkinson, 1989). Cohen (1994) discusses specific ways of designing roles for cooperative learning. She provides detailed examples of roles that can be

used in groupwork, such as facilitator, materials manager, and reporter. Cohen's examples of roles also emphasize the importance of rotating the roles at the start of every activity to provide equity within the groups. As Cohen (1994) explains, roles give each member something specific to do, creating a smooth-functioning and productive group, illuminating issues with members dominating the group or making little contribution.

Cohen and Lotan (1995) conducted a study to better understand the complexities in groupwork, analyzing how groupwork can be implemented to minimize status issues that arise. The study examined thirteen classrooms in the San Francisco Bay area, grades two through five. The average number of students per classroom was twenty-seven students, the majority being students who were from language-minority and low-income backgrounds. The teachers who were involved in the study had a two-week training prior to the implementation of the structure Cohen and Lotan (1995) were studying. The training focused on Complex Instruction, a method of cooperative learning for heterogeneous classrooms.

In the study, the researchers hypothesized that teachers can influence the status dynamics in a heterogeneous classroom by organizing groupwork with heterogeneous groups. Because of the diverse populations in the schools of study, Cohen and Lotan (1995) examined how teachers can create an inclusive environment that supports all students in their learning of academics and development in groupwork. Researchers specifically analyzed how status plays into the dynamics of cooperative learning, with

*status* being defined as the ways in which students perceives themselves and their competence in comparison to others in the classroom. Status is present within all classrooms, with the potential to create ineffective and harmful experiences for students.

Through the data collection period, Cohen and Lotan (1995) used a specific process when observing the class sessions. They chose particular students in the classrooms as their target students to focus on, with the understanding that it would be more effective to pinpoint students rather than attempt to observe all students. The researchers observed verbal participation, non-verbal communication, engagement, and interactions with other members of the group.

The teachers were trained to organize small groups with mixed genders and different levels of achievement and English proficiency. Students were involved in the task of problem solving in mathematics with the use of manipulatives. The tasks were created to require students to collaborate using skills of reasoning, hypothesizing, visual and spatial thinking, observation, and interpersonal skills. During the lessons, teachers were trained to allow the majority of the lesson to proceed with students talking and working with one another in their groups.

The data was collected through the observations of students' actions, participation, and contribution to their group. In their definition of status, Cohen and Lotan (1995) categorized status as either low- or high-status, analyzing the participation among students by taking notes on how many

times students participated in the activities. Low-status students were the central focus; these were the students who participated less, with other group-members taking the lead with discussions and contribution of ideas. During this study, teachers used status treatments as a way to increase the participation of low-status students.

By assigning competence to those low-status individuals and acknowledging their contributions to the group's work, researchers hypothesized that the status treatment used in this study would increase the number of times the low-status children contributed to their group. Researchers tallied the amount of times teachers assigned competence or acknowledged students' participation, followed by the same process of tallies when those students contributed to the groupwork. Through identifying of who was low-status, Cohen and Lotan's (1995) research examined students' beliefs about competence both for themselves and for their peers.

Cohen and Lotan (1995) utilized cooperative learning by implementing tasks that required multiple students' participation to complete. In Cohen's research frequently uses complex instruction in cooperative learning, with *Groupworthy Tasks*, requiring more than one individual to complete because of the cognitive level of the work. Cohen and Lotan (1995) showed that incorporating complex instruction into cooperative learning has positive outcomes for low-status students. The researchers' findings showed that the low-status students' participation increased when teachers utilized the status treatment.

The clear and specific details informing how the research was conducted strengthened the transferability of this study. Cohen and Lotan (1995) spoke to the potential weakness of their study due to the quantity of theories and ideas that they attempted to fit into one study. With so much theory and so many ideas incorporated into the study, credibility is weakened because of the difficulty of fully assessing the importance of any one idea. Cohen and Lotan provided detailed and realistic suggestions about implementing cooperative learning in a classroom, contributing to the dependability of the study.

When teachers overlook or misunderstand status in a classroom, there is potential harm to individual students, damaging efforts to create a collaborative atmosphere in the classroom. The potential damage is that the learning can become exclusive to particular students, leaving out students who are potentially low-status (Berry, 2006; Cohen & Lotan, 1995).

Though status can create serious issues in groupwork, there are structures to utilize when planning for the beginning of the school year; as Cohen (1994) argued, status exists from the start of the school year, but with effort to minimize status tensions, there can be remarkable outcomes. Teachers can create structures such as group roles, clear expectations explained to students, paying close attention to who is participating, and using one or more method to address the students who are not participating. When planning, teachers can note specific areas to assign competence to students who are low status (Featherstone, et. al. 2011). Assigning

competence is clearly articulated by Cohen (1994) as a way to “create some positive expectations for intellectual competence that will combine with the preexisting set of negative expectations” (pg. 104), emphasizing the importance of teachers assisting the process of replacing the negative expectations with positive. When teachers assign competence to low-status students, classmates perceive them differently and the group’s expectations of the individual change. In turn, the self-confidence and status of those individuals increases.

Over time, teachers will see a difference in individuals in the classroom in increased participation with a sense of self-confidence in their academic persona. Self-esteem in the classroom is shaped by students’ feeling of inclusion with the understanding that their presence and contributions make a difference in their work (Berry, 2006; Cohen et al., 1999).

The success of collaborative learning is cultivated through attentiveness, addressing status in the classroom (Battistich, 1993; Berry, 2006; Cohen, 1994). The foundation of collaborative learning is for the teacher to be effective in creating a community of learners. In such a community, students will engage, let others participate, and support their peers through the process of learning. This is central in the process of planning for cooperative learning experiences, with the effect of cultivating the most nurturing and valuable cooperative learning environment for the students (Berry, 2006; Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Wilkinson, 1989).

## CHAPTER 2: ACTION RESEARCH ON GROUPWORK

### **Research Data and Analysis**

My action research project focused on cooperative learning by investigating how groupwork could support the development of students' social and emotional skills. Among the research studies reviewed in Chapter 1, Slavin (1950) emphasized specific aspects of social and emotional skills that I explored in this action research project. Because of the limited time in which I conducted this research, I limited my focus to communication skills, social sensitivity, and students' flexibility in groupwork.

Research has shown that cooperative learning is effective when implemented in particular ways. Specifically, the following ideas, taken from research on groupwork, guided the design of this study:

- Clear expectations explained and role-played by children prior to students working in a group;
- Heterogeneous groups;
- Altering my role in the classroom during cooperative learning experiences to provide space for students to work collaboratively without my direct supervision (Cohen, 1994);  
and
- Diligent analysis of status issues and addressing those as they arise.

This chapter provides the methods I used to conduct my action research project with the above ideas guiding my action research.

## **Participants and Setting**

My action research was conducted in an alternative public elementary school, where the students are admitted by a district-wide lottery.

Neighborhood families have the option to have their children attend this school. Because Sunny Mountain Elementary is an alternative program, the enrollment process is different than other public schools, and offers a unique schooling experience for students and their families.

The school is located in a residential area near state office buildings and other businesses. The school has an enrollment of about 300 students, kindergarten through fifth grade. The student population is 80% white, and approximately 28% of the students receive free-or-reduced lunch. The school is located near the center of the city, with easy access to the city bus and to stores.

The school culture cultivates a philosophy based around students' needs and the opportunity to develop at one's own pace. This has become increasingly challenging with the state requirements and pressures due to standardized test scores. Because this school is public, students are required to participate in the standardized tests, which create challenges for teachers as they enact the philosophy of Sunny Mountain in their teaching practices.

I conducted my research in a kindergarten and first-grade multi-age classroom, structured to foster the school's philosophy. Multi-age classrooms provide the space for students to develop at their own pace with different

abilities and levels present within each classroom. The classroom of study was one of two classrooms to include kindergarten and first-grade students in a multi-age setting. The classroom included twenty-four students, including one student with severe health needs. The student had a one-on-one nurse to assist with feeding and transporting her to various locations because she was incapable of mobility without assistance. There were two students who were on IEPs (Individualized Educational Plans), both of whom were in the first grade. Twelve of the students in the class were in kindergarten and the remainder in the first grade.

Many incoming kindergarten students have no prior experience in schooling and have not participated in the routines that schooling expects of students. Experiencing formal schooling for the first time can be challenging for students, families, and teachers. Because first-grade students have learned the expectations and routines of schooling the previous year, they modeled the expectations for the incoming kindergarten students and help the transition from home to school.

My classroom was located in an area in the building that supported the young students in my class. The classroom, located on the main floor of the building, provided easy access to the playground, office, nurse's office, library, and cafeteria. Our classroom had floor space throughout the classroom, which had various uses throughout the school day. A large area located to the left of the door and considered the front of the classroom was where we held morning meeting, mini-lessons, and other whole-class

activities. To the right of the door was a small work area where I could hold one-on-one sessions with students or where students could work independently. The center of the classroom included five circular tables, with an additional rectangular table for our one student with a one-on-one assistant. The circular tables were large enough to seat four or five students at each table.

My mentor teacher, Anne, implemented one role for each table, and students had the responsibility of maintaining this role. In this classroom, the role was called *Table Manager* and the role alternated Monday-Friday to give every student the opportunity of being responsible to gather any materials their table group might need for a particular task. Materials needed for a specific task might include writing folders, worksheets, pencils, colored pencils, glue, and other physical objects that did not remain at the tables during the day. The intent of implementing the table-manager role in table groups was to cultivate a learning community as students learned to rely on one another for materials and other items in any given activity.

Prior to the beginning of an activity, Anne or I provided directions so that the table managers knew what materials were needed for the activity. We kept materials in the same place for easy accessibility for students. Anne organized the classroom for students to have access to materials and items that they may need throughout the school day.

Materials in cabinets or places out of sight are intentional in the organization of the classroom. Most teaching materials or excess school

supplies are stored away to limit any issues that may arise. The wall directly parallel to the door has two uses; one of the uses is for storage. There is a shelf that is approximately three feet high and the length of the wall. The shelf contains manipulatives, games, teaching materials, and other miscellaneous items. The shelf is covered with a blue curtain to minimize possible distractions to students' focus and learning. The classroom's library was located on the counter area of the shelf. There were eighteen plastic tubs for book storage, organized by fiction, non-fiction, poetry, ABC books, and miscellaneous categories. Reading time was one of many times during the day that students had choice in where they settled in to read their book. The different areas of the classroom were all open for students to use during reading time.

The open area at the front of the classroom was mainly used for our class gathering spot; morning meeting is one of many examples. When we as a classroom community gathered the front of the classroom and sat together in a circle. Morning meeting was also a time for students to spend approximately three minutes sharing something about themselves or their lives that they wanted their classmates to know. We selected students in alphabetical order, and students had the option to pass or share. Sharing in less formal ways was a normal process during learning activities. Students shared their mathematical thinking, pieces of writing, and their thoughts about the books they read. Through sharing, students developed social and communication skills by learning how to articulate their thoughts verbally. I

supported students in sharing, which helped students feel comfortable and safe in the classroom.

Because our students were young children, we felt that it was important to scaffold students in their processes of sharing because sharing is one way of supporting students to feel connected to the classroom community. Students were experiencing their first years of formal schooling, which is an important time to integrate cooperative learning into the classroom structure. Through discussion and sharing, students developed foundational skills that were essential when students participated in cooperative learning activities.

My action research focused on students' development, studying how the implementation of cooperative learning has the potential to support the development of primary students' emotional and social skills in a multi-age classroom.

### **In Action: Conducting the Research**

Many structures of the school and this classroom supported my implementation of cooperative learning. The school as a whole supported and utilized cooperative learning in many ways, from academic activities to the involvement students had in maintaining the school's community garden. This research study utilized the cooperative learning structures Anne and the school already implemented, and I emphasized particular aspects that helped me better understand primary students' cooperative learning in relation to social and emotional development.

In the research literature, groupwork often involves three or more individuals, but groupwork in Anne's classroom more often had two students per. After observing the groupwork in her classroom and reviewing the research on groupwork in primary grades, I found that research suggests that groupwork in primary grades should start with partners because of the students' developmental levels, with possibilities of increasing the number of students per group later in the school year (Mandel and Smith, 1990; Tarim, 2009). I implemented groupwork as Anne did in her teaching practices because of the effectiveness I witnessed, along with research confirming the importance of small-group size for young children.

Successful experiences in cooperative learning activities are dependent on the relationship students have established with each other. Small group sizes are one way I fostered positive experiences for students in groupwork. Research also suggests that teachers begin community-building activities from the first day of school to foster a positive learning environment (Stevens & Slavin, 1995). Through different activities, particularly morning meeting, I facilitated activities that fostered community as students learned about one another. Through discussions and role-playing activities, students learned how to treat one another to encourage, support, and be respectful in the classroom. With young children, discussions and role-play are important because they support students in learning how to handle interactions with others. Morning meeting was used in my research as a way to create a safe learning community that fostered equity for all.

Morning Meeting continued throughout the school year, and new activities were introduced, as students were ready for more complexity in the community-building activities. Other areas I focused on for my research were writing, reading, math, and art. However, the school used a migration for math, as students moved from their home classroom to form single-grade groupings. This meant that half of the students in my math lessons had a different home teacher, with different teaching practices than my own. Mathematics is taught using Bridges curriculum (Math Learning Center, 2014) with cooperative learning built into the activities and projects.

When students completed assignments and activities, there was often independent work with the integration of cooperative learning exercises. An example of cooperative learning in Writer's Workshop is the process that students completed when they created a piece of writing. Before students completed a final draft, they worked with one other student to share the piece and receive feedback about one aspect they could add or change. This is an example of independent work with cooperative learning integrated into the activity. To prepare students to give one another feedback during Writer's Workshop, I facilitated role-play activities with two volunteers who modeled to the rest of the class what it looks like to listen to a peer's writing and how they would respond with feedback. These sharing and feedback sessions were videotaped for later analysis.

Similar processes for reading were completed by videotaping particular reading sessions. Students were assigned a partner and were

given a specified amount of time to choose books together; I recommended that each student have one book that she really wants to read. The groups then settled somewhere on the floor to read the books together. The one expectation was that both students had the opportunity to read during the twenty-minute reading session.

In every cooperative learning lesson I taught, my goal was to support students by providing groups with the tools and instructions needed prior to beginning the activity. Research suggests that teachers need to give students the space to work with their peers without a teacher involved in every aspect of the activities (Cohen et al., 1989; Dekker et al., 1996). I used this time to listen and to observe students' processes by taking notes in my field journal about things I heard and saw in the groups.

### **Data Collection**

This action research study was qualitative in nature, and my role in the study was both the teacher-researcher and student teacher. The data was collected over the course of ten weeks, beginning in the first week of school. Data for this action research project included field notes, student interviews, and videos of student groups during cooperative learning activities. The nature of my study required me to begin implementing the structural aspects of cooperative learning on the first day of school with our morning meeting. This was an opportunity for me to begin the process of cultivating a learning community through our first time meeting together as a class.

From the start of the school year, students began practicing collaboration through the creation of our classroom agreements. The classroom agreements were the foundation of what we expected of all members in the learning community. The first-grade students in our class had participated in a similar process the previous year, and these students supported the incoming kindergarten students in understanding what was important in a classroom community.

**Research journal and field notes.** My role as a teacher-researcher was complex in that it required me to have the ability to reflect and notice the informative moments of my own instruction both during and after instruction. Provocative moments might pass unnoticed because of my position as the teacher. As much as possible, I completed journal entries during or directly after an activity. With some lessons I needed to quickly transition from one activity to the next, and my opportunity to take notes was not until recess. In the journal entries, I recorded specific details of each activity and thorough notes about group members and the observations of body language and/or comments from individual students.

The research journal and field notebook were used to help me better understand what I observed and witnessed in groupwork activities. Because I did not know what my coding categories were when I started the action research, the use of a field notebook and research journal helped me to identify the different categories I later used when analyzing my data. After

each research journal entry, I took a few minutes to create a memo in reflection of my research journal entry.

**Student interviews.** At the beginning of the study I selected four students whom I interviewed three times throughout the period of my research. I chose students who represented a range in social and emotional needs, special needs, and other present variations in the classroom. I interviewed these students at the beginning, mid-point, and at the closing of my research, using semi-structured interviews, approximately ten minutes with each interviewee. These interviews enabled me to gather information about how students thought about cooperative learning as a support for the development of their social and emotional skills. The interviews provided unique data in giving insight into students' experiences in the cooperative learning activities.

The first interviews began with my explanation of the purpose of these interviews. It was important that students understood that the interviews were helping me understand and strengthen my teaching practices. Students were told that they could pass on any question if they did not have a response. I then asked students the questions I had designed prior to the interview. These questions helped me better understand how students were working through collaborative learning activities. I tape-recorded the interviews and transcribed them later. The tape-recording and transcription also provided an accurate representation of the students' thoughts.

The interviews provide unique information that I could not obtain with field notes or videotape recordings. I chose to interview students throughout the data collection period because the interviews helped me understand how students were developing skills through cooperative learning experiences. For example, the first interview provided insight on students' beginning skills; their responses to the questions gave me information about the ways students work together. After the first interviews, I was able to find out about students' experiences thus far and alter instruction or support students in particular ways if it was necessary. An example would be the way I altered my introduction to the groupwork activity; in the first set of interviews, two students stated that their partner was not helping or was mean to them. This alerted me to frontload the behavioral expectations and ways of treating one another, which is how I decided to use role-playing prior to students beginning the activity. I would have two volunteers role-play a scenario of an issue arising and working it out with kind words and actions. After the first interview I conducted two more interviews, which was helpful in understanding how students were working together. I was also able to determine whether there were differences in the students' responses from the previous interviews.

The interview questions were designed to be student-friendly, using language that allowed children to access and understand the interview questions. The questions I created were clear and focused to support students in connecting the questions to specific cooperative learning

experiences (Wood, 2007). I interviewed students directly after finishing a groupwork activity because I wanted to support students' responses to include truth, detail, and reflection of their experiences. The questions I posed to students in the interviews were:

- Can you tell me what you worked on today in your group?
- Did you feel supported by your group?
- Were there any moments in today's activity that you supported your group?
- Did you face any confusions, problems, or challenges?
- If you responded with "yes," what did you do to solve the issue?
- Did your group face any confusions, problems, or challenges?
- If you responded with "yes," what did you and your group do to solve the situation?
- How did you feel when you were working with your group?

Overall, the interview environment was intended to be a relaxed and comfortable experience for children. The questions were intended to help me better understand my research question by inquiring about the experiences students had during the ten-week study.

**Video recording.** Video recording was used in my data collection to ensure I would have access to more than one group when I analyzed my data. I videotaped two groupwork activities a week, with effort in videotaping different disciplines. Because I could only observe one group at a time, I videotaped a particular group, or multiple groups working in close proximity.

Recording groups was one way to ensure that I could later watch and notice interactions that I could not notice during the lesson.

Video recordings disclosed particular aspects of groupwork that I could not have witnessed. Because I was the teacher-researcher, I knew before beginning my research that I would need video recordings to provide concrete occurrences, which is different than my field notes and interviews. The use of video recording provided another perspective to entries in my field notes and journal, and I also used the video recordings to better understand why students responded in particular ways during their interviews. To better understand how students were developing social and emotional skills in groupwork, I used video recordings and transcriptions when I analyzed what was occurring in the cooperative learning activities.

### **Limitations of Research**

Because the study began at the beginning of the school year, there was little time for students to understand the classroom and school's routine and expectations. Before beginning the research, I understood how complex and time-consuming the implementation of cooperative learning is with primary grades, which was problematic when my kindergarten students were experiencing cooperative learning for the first time, not to mention this was many students first time in a formal school setting. We spent the first six weeks of school learning about one another and the community we would form for the school year, and creating Classroom Agreements. We were also learning and practicing the expectations of school, with guided discovery

activities on many of the materials in the classroom; some of the materials include crayons, pattern blocks, books, and scissors. Throughout the first six weeks of school, students were experiencing their first groupwork activities, learning what groupwork offers and what was expected of them.

The amount of time spent in guided-discovery activities and community-building activities provided successes in these experiences, which I would not foresee occurring if the school year had begun differently. Students spent the first week of school independently exploring different materials, and the first groupwork activities were accessible to all students because I would have students get in groups after they worked independently and answer specific questions about their experiences with the materials.

Rather than beginning groupwork right away with mathematics, reading, or writing, students experienced their first groupwork activities, including a sharing element and collaboration to create something with the materials. The shyness and resistance was quickly minimized as children became invested in the tasks. This was the most powerful success in my research because I was nervous about students coming into school for the first time, with the expectation to collaborate almost instantly. Transferability is strengthened because of the ways in which I considered how I could ease into groupwork, ensuring accessibility by all students. The nature of this study fosters strong transformative criteria; I was deliberate in planning groupwork activities, which included how I would create expectations to

foster equal participation and hearing all students' voices during work time. Because this action research was conducted in primary grades, I saw an importance in structuring the activities in a particular way to support all students in the learning experience. Because the structure promoted participation of all students and fostered a safe learning environment for students to work collaboratively, social justice elements were reflected through my effort in creating a learning environment in which all voices and participation of all learners were significant in the learning process.

There were other aspects of the study that affect this study's transferability. The study was conducted in a unique school community that differed from many traditional public schools, potentially weakening the transferability of the study. I tried to strengthen the transferability of my study using rich-thick descriptions of the practice I implemented as well as of the classroom and school context. With specific and clear description of the setting and implementation of cooperative learning, I believe that a teacher can find the study applicable to her own practice of cooperative learning.

In addition to my involvement in the classroom as a student teacher, my role in the duration of the action research was the teacher-researcher, potentially threatening the credibility of the study due to internal biases. I included interviews as one of the methods for collecting data, providing factual groupwork experiences from the participants themselves. The interviews were transcribed and used to understand the patterns in my data, minimizing potential questions about internal bias or the findings being in

conflict with the realities of implementing groupwork. In addition, using three methods of analysis in conducting my action research, thus meeting triangulation criteria, strengthens the credibility.

The use of research journals can weaken the dependability of the study because the notes were taken from the bias of on my own perceptions and position in the classroom. In two ways I attempted to minimize my personal biases in the research journal: the first being that my entries include quotations from students' comments and notes about body language within the groups, minimizing my own assumptions of the groupwork dynamics. Second, I wrote memos immediately following the field journal entries with notes about what I was thinking and understanding based on each activity, providing a space to reflect on my own position as the teacher-researcher. As a teacher-researcher, I reflected in writing as a way to filter my assumptions and perceptions, focusing on the raw data I had in my research notebook; through the act of critical reflection of my position, dependability is strengthened.

For video transcription, I focused on significant moments in the videos, creating a process to pinpoint videos I would fully or partially transcribe. I watched videos all the way through, making notes for time stamps that seemed noteworthy. The second time watching the video, I would watch the video from beginning to end, and making more concrete notes with time stamps I would transcribe. After completing this process with each video, I created a chart and began at the first video, transcribing the moments I

noted. Because of the protocol I completed with the videos, confirmability is strengthened by my consistent system for transcribing videos.

Additionally, I maintained content logs as a way to record any additional thoughts, questions, and concerns, in relationship to the videos. Part of the content log included the specifics of the activity I had recorded: the date, activity, goals of the activities, and who was the focus for the recording. For example, in some recordings, I purposely positioned the video camera far enough away from students so the picture would include all students, whereas in other videos I focused on one or two groups. This was useful when I began the process of coding my videos because I could refer to my content log for additional information.

Video transcriptions contributed to the triangulation of data for this study. Due to time constraints, I limited my data collection to my research journal and field notes, student interviews, and video recording. I used each of the sets of data to code, using a color-coding system to understand what patterns and themes were surfacing. During the process of coding the data, I kept my research question in visual reach, continuously asking myself in what ways the data helped me to better understand how cooperative learning supports students' development of social and emotional skills.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

### **My Lens in the Action Research**

The action research project was conducted to better understand the potential of groupwork in supporting young children in developing social and emotional skills. Groupwork is proven to increase students' achievement in the different disciplinary areas (Dekker et al., 1996; Emmer & Gerwels, 2002; McNair, 2000). Though the existing research provided insights demonstrating how students excelled academically through groupwork, my focus was primary grades, and there is little research that focuses on that particular age range. My goal was to better understand how young children could benefit from groupwork. Because of the lack of research on primary grades, looking specifically at social and emotional skill development further drove my motivation to better understand how I can use groupwork as a practice in my classroom, in supporting young children in their academics as well as in their developing social and emotional skills.

Before I conducted my action research project, I spent a great deal of time learning about groupwork and the ways in which a system could be implemented, focusing on ways to cultivate experiences for students to collaborate with one another in groupwork activities. In groupwork, students work collaboratively to solve a problem, create a product, or complete other cooperative tasks; this practice provides the space for students to collaborate, using language and other forms of collaboration to work with others. Through this action research project, I hoped to better understand

how collaborative activities promoted skill development in the capacities of social and emotional skills.

I became interested in groupwork when I took a math course as an undergraduate at The Evergreen State College. Subsequently I was accepted into the Master in Teaching program at The Evergreen State College. In the program, we spent the first year of the program developing the capacities to create inclusive and democratic classrooms, which is one of the reasons I have become interested in groupwork. In groupwork, students learn how to work with others, using and developing skills to be a participant in a collaborative setting. In year one of the Master in Teaching program, I began my practicum in a multiage kindergarten and first-grade classroom, leading up to my student teaching in the fall, with the same teacher and multiage grades. Throughout my student teaching experience, I implemented new teaching practices, primarily groupwork, deeply interested to learn how the practice can support the development of social and emotional skills for young children.

### **Research Action**

In preparation for implementing groupwork into my teaching practice, I used the knowledge I acquired through my literature research and created a system that I believed to be developmentally appropriate for primary grades, including explicit expectations for groupwork tasks. I want to note that one element of introducing expectations was time to role-play, providing concrete examples of how these expectations look and sound. In addition, I explicitly

discussed the expectations discussed prior to any groupwork activity; students would restate the expectations in their own words also. The expectations in groupwork activities were:

- Work together with your group; all group members need to participate and turn in their own recording sheet.
- If you have a question, check-in with your group members; the table manager is responsible to raise their hand if the question remains after checking in with the group.
- You are working with others; think and act in a way that makes everyone feel safe and included in the learning.

Before students were dismissed to work with their groups, I gathered the class together for a mini-lesson, discussing the learning targets, expectations, and questions or concerns from the group. Following that was the organization of groups; in most cases, I used partners for groups, randomly choosing out of stack cards which had the names of students on them. In some cases, I would rearrange groups based on what I knew about students and their working habits with others. From there, students had the space to work anywhere in the classroom with the expectation that the way students were sitting would be inclusive to all group members.

When students were dismissed to work in groups, I set the timer, advising students to keep track of the time by checking the timer periodically. While groups were working, I walked around to different groups, with my field notebook, taking notes of what I heard and saw, and the language used

among groups. I noted the verbal language, body language, and tone of voice. Towards the end of the activity, I alerted children to check in with their groups and consider the amount of time they had remaining, usually ten minutes. In the closing of the activity, we came together and debriefed the groupwork task, allowing students to generally talk about what they enjoyed, challenges, and hopes or needs for the future. This was the structure I designed for groupwork activities, utilizing videorecording, interviews, and a field notebook to record how the structure supported students' development of social and emotional skills.

### **Research Findings**

This action research project was conducted to better understand how cooperative learning supports primary-aged students in developing social and emotional skills. I implemented a groupwork structure promoting equity through heterogeneous groups. During my instructions for the groupwork activities, I told to students that I would explain the instructions once and after groups begin working, it would be their responsibility to support one another when there were questions before asking me for help. This strategy was significant in the structure I was creating because my goal was for students to support one another before asking me for assistance. Through the data analysis process, two themes emerged: *Interdependence* and *Identifying Needs and Feelings*.

## **Interdependence**

During the process of designing a structure for groupwork in my student teaching, one of the goals was to create groupwork activities in which students had to collaborate to complete the activity. This component was important because if students could easily complete the activity individually, they would not feel compelled to work with others; Cohen's (1994) research on groupwork supports this goal by suggesting that teachers design highly rigorous activities requiring more than one brain to complete. Though I implemented groupwork using this philosophy to an extent, I also created groupwork activities involving students collaborating to edit their writing, practice reading aloud, solve different mathematical problems, and share books with a group informally.

As I analyzed my data, beginning with interviews, I noticed many responses from students demonstrating interdependence among their group-members, or in some cases demonstrating the lack of interdependence, because of a group member's level of willingness to collaborate, share, or include their ideas in the work. Additionally, the process of analyzing interviews created more questions in relation to the different ways interdependence played out throughout the duration of the action research.

Below is an interview example, from the same individual on two different occasions, providing insight on how I identified interdependence in this data source:

Interviewer: Did you face any challenges today?

Student: Yes, I tried to solve a problem by myself and I asked him for help. I was umm..I was stuck. But he just did it for me and I wanted to do it. I asked for help. (*Interview date: 9/17/14*)

In an interview nearly two months later, the same student answered my question about challenges as follows:

Interviewer: Did you face any challenges today?

Student: A little. I needed help and my partner was in the bathroom but ugh, umm...when he came back I asked him for help. I asked him because we need to ask the group first and he showed me what he did and we worked on it together.

Interviewer: How did you feel when you worked with your group today?

Student: Good...he helped me when I was umm...really frustrated, because I didn't get it. (*Interview Date: 11/9/14*)

In the example, there is a definite change over the course of eight weeks as students developed social skills to collaborate when one member of the group did not understand something. As shown in the first interview, one student was frustrated because their<sup>2</sup> partner did the work for them when they expressed the need for some support. The last interview, conducted on November 9, 2014, illustrates how I observed skills of interdependence when students supported one another in understanding the material.

---

<sup>2</sup> This paper will use *their* (and other plural pronouns) when I am referring to students in my class because I had two students who did not conform to the gender binary of him/her. In the text, *their* will refer to individual students in my class.

As I moved forward analyzing my data, the theme I titled as Interdependence was interwoven within both video transcriptions and my field notebook. Through the process of transcribing my videos, I began to notice keywords alerting me to statements of interdependence; below I have included a section of a video, along with some quotes from students that I wrote in my field notebook. I have underlined the words that became key in defining Interdependence. In the following excerpt from a math lesson, the underlined words and phrases show students' growing enactment of interdependence.

Student #1: "Can I write too? We can share."

Student #2: "You have the blocks so that isn't fair."

*[Silence for thirty-five seconds]*

Student #2: "Can we share them."

Student #1: "No...well...yeah. Okay, I will do one question with the blocks and you can help me and write...and umm.... You can do the blocks the next time, I will help and I write."

Student #2: "Okay, I like that plan." (*Video date: 10/2/14*)

In the excerpt above, students were working in groups during math. The underlined words represent an overall pattern I noticed during the analyzing process. After noticing this, I began to further analyze the data with an eye for this collaborative interdependence. It became apparent that this was significant in understanding my research question. Students were developing the skills to understand that their role is to support their group and

also have the ability to ask for help and utilize dialogue to promote equity in groups. Similarly, weeks later I videotaped a Writer's Workshop group activity where students were providing a "question of wonder" and providing positive feedback, with a comment about their favorite part of the sharer's writing. The excerpt below demonstrates interdependence through supporting group processes in which individuals have the opportunity to succeed.

*[Student #1 is reading their piece of writing and stops to say],*

Student #1: "I ugh. Umm....can't read this. I can't read my writing. I want to know the word."

Student #2: "Can I see?"

*[Student #1 turns their packet and points to the word]*

Student #2: " is a r." *[student makes the r sound]*

Student #1: "That is a C. Wait, I remember!"

Student #2: "We did it together, and you know. What is it?"

Student #1: "Rock. I went to the beach and picked up rocks".

*(Video: 10/16/14)*

The example of the transcribed video has specific words underlined to illustrate how interdependence occurred in groupwork. Because my ultimate goal in this action research project was to better understand how cooperative learning supports students in developing social and emotional skills, I began to analyze the data with a particular interest in the words students were using to speak to one another in cooperative learning activities.

It became apparent through the analysis of my data that students were developing social skills; students were extending their use of language when they spoke to each other and when they spoke about their groupwork experiences. Some examples of the language use I am referring to were *help, together, we, share, fair, and us*. Those are examples of keywords that I found as I worked to understand the theme interdependence. Interdependence moves beyond words like *I, me, and alone*, and utilizes collaboration, working with others to resolve challenges and create or complete a task. Interdependence demonstrates emotional skill by developing capacities to reach out to group members, feeling safe to express a need and to be vulnerable to group members.

After groupwork activities, I often asked students to hold up a finger from one to three to show how comfortable and safe they felt asking for support. One finger expressed uneasiness and discomfort in asking for support when frustrated or confused; two represented sometimes feeling comfortable; and three showed a feeling of certainty in asking for support. When this question was asked after the second groupwork activity, only six students held up a three, twelve held up a two, and six students expressed a number one. After seven weeks of groupwork activities, I only had two students who held up a one, five students expressed a two, and eighteen students held a three up, demonstrating a shift in students' comfort level in vulnerability. I continue to question whether students were developing social skills in identifying language to express their need, or if students' emotional

skills were further developed, with an increased level of comfort with their learning community and feeling of safety in taking risks in their groups.

### Identifying Needs and Feelings

I began to analyze my interviews for the fourth time; reading through, students were using the phrase “I need...” and using feelings to describe how they felt in that particular group. I identified a pattern in the interviews in how students developed the language to articulate their needs over the duration of the study. In the table below (Table 1), students’ use of “I needed...” phrases is represented to illustrate how students responded to questions in the interviews.

**Table 1**

*Students Identify Needs in the Interviews*

Interviewees (X represents one “I need/want” phrase)	Interview #1 9/17/15	Interview #2 10/17/15	Interview #3 11/9/15
Student #1			X
Student #2	X		X X
Student #3		X	
Student #4		X	X

There was one “I needed...” phrase in the first interview, two at the mid-point and subsequently, the final interview on November 11, 2014 had four “I needed” phrases used in the interview, two of which were stated by the same student. As indicated in the table above (Table 1), student three did not utilize the “I needed” phrase in the final interview; the student’s responses in the interview were all positive, communicating that the “activity was perfect and my partner was helpful.” For this particular student, it is possible that the “I needed” phrase was unnecessary when asked to share their cooperative

learning experience with me. This phrase is one of many we practiced during Morning Meeting and in preparation for groupwork activities. In addition, we discussed how we can communicate our needs in groupwork and how an individual or group can respond to a group member to help with the process of meeting those needs. The table highlights how those students' use of the phrase "I needed..." increased as they experienced more groupwork activities.

The following excerpts show how students identified needs and feelings when responding to interview questions.

Interviewer: How did you feel today when you worked with your partner?

Student: I felt great! I can work with him...He lets me help and umm...and he doesn't get mad or sad if I show him something when he does it wrong. *(Interview Date 11/9/14)*

The next interview excerpt shows how a different student responded to the same question:

Interviewer: How did you feel today when you worked with your partner?

Student: Good...she helped me with my work. I was getting sad because I didn't know what to do but I asked her and she helped. I need help and she did. I said thank you to her. It was nice. *(Interview date: 11/ 9/14)*

The responses from two different students who were working in different groups provides insight into the ways in which students used feelings or needs in their responses to the questions. While I was coding my field notebook, it became apparent that I needed to further narrow my lens to analyze the pattern of needs and feelings.

In my field notebook, in a short transcription of a group working together during reading, I recorded a student expressing his need to have a turn and be listened to by his group. The group responded by saying, “go then,” and as the child began to share his book, the members began looking at their own books while he was sharing. He stopped, paused for almost twenty seconds and said, “You had turns and I listened to you. Can you listen to me and look at your book after?” To my surprise, the two group members put their books aside and adjusted their body language to show respectful listening. I found this example significant in illustrating how the individual expressed his need to his group members and how the group respected his request and responded as he asked. Because he had the capacities to identify and communicate his needs, the group was able to work through the challenge without my intervention.

Body language continued as a pattern in my videos, with emphasis on students’ abilities to adjust their body language as requested by group members. Prior to students working in cooperative learning activities, we practiced what it looks and sounds like to participate in groupwork; in the videos there was evidence of students understanding the importance of their

position in their group. It was normal to see children adjust their physical position in a group if they were excluded or did not have access to the physical objects in an activity. I observed a connection between needs and physical positioning in groupwork. If children did not physically have access to the materials, both the videos and my field notebook showed students asking their classmates to make space, or telling classmates that they needed more access.

Identifying needs and recognizing feelings were central in many of the dialogues during groupwork, as evidenced in video transcriptions and entries in my field notebook. The theme Identifying Needs directly aligns to my research question with emphasis on emotional skill development. Many students faced individual and group challenges, and with the capacities to identify needs, students could spend the majority of their work time completing the task when students' needs were communicated and met by group members.

### **Summary of Findings**

During the period of time in which I conducted my action research project, I did not anticipate or recognize the themes that surfaced from this project. Through the experience of planning an action research project, conducting the project, and analyzing my data, I have learned the importance of ongoing reflection as a teacher, because I am easily consumed in the moment of teaching. I better understand myself as a teacher who utilizes

groupwork as a practice in her teaching, promoting equity by equal participation and dialogue among all participants.

Furthermore, the themes that surfaced, Interdependence and Identifying Needs, are significant for successful groupwork. Both are complex, however both are connected directly to skill development and students' capacities to collaborate and communicate with others. Through this experience, I have only begun to understand the complexities of groupwork; I implemented a practice, hoping to promote a democratic learning community in which students would collaborate by supporting one another's learning experiences.

### **Implications and Suggestions for Further Research**

There has been an abundance of research suggesting how cooperative learning has positive implications for student learning. Groupwork can improve student academic growth and has the potential to support students' social and emotional skill development (Stevens & Slavin, 1995; Yackel, Cobb, & Wood, 1991). However, the majority of research studying groupwork focuses on higher grades, providing little research specific to primary grades.

In this action research study, my purpose was to utilize groupwork as a teaching practice to create a student-centered classroom by creating structures that would promote student participation, student voice, and equity for all learners. Through the research and experiences I had prior to conducting this research study, I had a hypothesis that young children's

social and emotional skills would develop from groupwork experiences if I created a structure where all students' voices were valued and all learners had access to the material. This action research study has educational implications, specifically for those educators who are interested in implementing cooperative learning in their classroom. Teachers can create groupwork in their classroom to support young learners developing social and emotional skills.

One of the implications is that clear expectations are imperative to successful groupwork experiences. For example, when I provided instructions about the groupwork activity, I began the lesson by stating, "I am giving instructions once. It is your responsibility to listen and ask me questions before you get started. Once you get started, you need to talk to your group members before asking me. If it is your question, it is everyone's question." This contributed to the accountability of individuals, and because I was consistent, students understood that the expectation was for them to communicate with each other before asking me a question. Thus, clear expectations and consistency with expectations promoted student accountability and participation, which supports the development of interdependence and communication among all learners.

Additionally, an implication for implementing groupwork in primary grades is to model the language that students ought to use during activities. During my research study, I modeled language that I wanted students to use during their own groupwork activities, which promoted equity and

participation because the language was based on individuals' needs and feelings. If students developed the language to verbally communicate their needs and feelings, I anticipated more success in groupwork. When I modeled the language, students heard successful examples of communication of needs and feelings, which potentially supported students' development of social and emotional skills. Therefore, an implication for groupwork in primary grades is modeling language specific to needs and feelings to support students in verbalizing their personal needs and feelings in groupwork settings.

The findings of this research study suggest that groupwork can have a positive effect on young children's development of social and emotional skills. I implemented structures to support students who were still learning their role in formal schooling and did not yet have the necessary social and emotional skills to successfully collaborate with peers in activities. With clear expectations, consistency of those expectations, and holding students accountable, the structure supported all learners in the experiences of groupwork activities.

Groupwork is student-centered and cultivates a classroom culture where students are engaging with peers to explore, question, and learn. Educators may express concern in implementing groupwork because this structure looks and sounds different than a traditional classroom. The noise level is higher than during independent seatwork, students are engaging in discussion, and the teacher is not the center of the learning; rather the

teacher's role is assessing students' processes by observing and possibly posing questions. However, the findings in this research point to potential benefits for implementing groupwork in primary grades. With clear expectations, consistency of expectations, accountability, and modeling the language that students should use, groupwork can offer powerful and meaningful learning experiences for students.

In my research study, I mostly created groups of two because the study was conducted the first three months of school and research suggests to only use groups of two for primary grades. Future research could focus on a longer time trajectory, analyzing how group size can increase as students develop skills. For example, at the start of the school year students may only work with one other student, but as skills develop, groups of three and even four could be created. I am interested to learn more about group size in primary grades. In the structure I implemented for groupwork, I utilized one group role, that of the *Table Manager*. Cohen (1994) describes various roles and their functions, which I am intrigued about and I am interested in learning from future research about roles in primary grades. My research study was created to understand how groupwork supports young children in developing social and emotional skills; through conducting the study I have new questions that future research could potentially address.

## References

- Battistich, V., Solomon, D., & Delucchi, K. (1993). Interaction processes and student outcomes in cooperative learning groups. *Chicago Journals*, 94(1), 19-32.
- Berry, R. A. W. (2006). Inclusion, power, and community: Teachers and students interpret the language of community in an inclusion classroom. *American Educational Research Journal*, 43(3), 489-529.
- Bertucci, A., Conte, S., Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2012). Influence of group processing on achievement and perception of social and academic support in elementary inexperienced cooperative learning groups. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 126(2), 329-398.
- Blumenfeld, P. C., Marx, R. W., Solloway, E., & Krajcik, J. (1996, November). Learning with peers: From small group cooperation to collaborative communities. *Educational Researcher*, 25(8), 37-40.
- Cohen, E. (1994). *Designing groupwork: Strategies for the heterogeneous classroom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Cohen, E. G., & Lotan, R. A. (1995). Producing equal-status interaction in the heterogeneous classroom. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(1), 99-120.
- Cohen, E. G., Lotan, R. A., Arellano, A. R., & Scarloss, B. A. (1999). Complex instruction: Equity in cooperative learning classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 38(2), 80-86.

- Cohen, E. G., Lotan, R. A., & Leechor, C. (1989). Can classrooms learn? *Sociology of Education*, 62(2), 75-94.
- Dekker, R., Elshout-Mohr, M., & Wood, T. (1996). How children regulate their own collaborative learning. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, 62(1), 57-79.
- Emmer, E. T., & Gerwels, M. C. (2002). Cooperative learning in elementary classrooms: Teaching practices and lesson characteristics. *The Elementary School Journal*, 103(1), 75-91.
- Esmonde, I. (2009). Ideas and identities: Supporting equity in cooperative mathematics learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(2), 1008-1043.
- Featherstone, H., Crespo, S., Jilk, L., Oslund, J., Parks, A., Woods, M. (2011). *Smarter Together!: Collaboration and Equity in the Elementary Math Classroom*. Reston, VA: National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.
- Good, T.L., Grouws, D.A., & Mason, D.A. (1990). Teachers' beliefs about small-group instruction in elementary school mathematics. *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, 21(1), 2-15.
- Johnson, M.L. (2006). Elementary school students' preferences and the classroom environment: Implications for educational practice and policy. *Journal of Negro Education*, 75(3), 506-518.

- Littrell, J.M., & Peterson, J.S. (2002). Establishing a comprehensive groupwork program in an elementary school: An in-depth case study. *Journal for Specialists in Groupwork, 27*(2).
- Mandel Morrow, L., & Smith, J. K. (1990). The effects of group size on interactive storybook reading. *Reading Research Quarterly, 25*(3), 213-231.
- Math Learning Center. (2014). *Bridges in Mathematics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.
- McNair, R. E. (2000). Working in the mathematics frame: Maximizing the potential to learn from students' mathematics classroom discussions. *Educational Studies in Mathematics, 42*(2), 197-209.
- Rimm-Kaufman, S.E., & Sawyer, B.E. (2004). Primary-grade teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, attitudes towards teaching, and discipline and teaching practice priorities in relation to the "responsive classroom" approach. *The Elementary School Journal, 104*(4), 321-341.
- Slavin, R. E. (1987a). Cooperative learning: Where behavioral and humanistic approaches to classroom motivation meet. *The Elementary School Journal, 88*(1), 29-37.
- Slavin, R. E. (1987b). Developmental and motivational perspectives on cooperative learning: A reconciliation. *Child Development, 58*(5), 1161-1167.
- Slavin, S. (1950). Learning and groupwork. *Journal of Educational Sociology, 24*(3), 132-143.

- Stevens, R. J., & Slavin, R. E. (1995). The cooperative elementary school: Effects on students' achievement, attitudes, and social relations. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(2), 321-351.
- Tarim, K. (2009). The effects of cooperative learning on preschoolers' mathematics problem-solving ability. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, 72(3), 325-340.
- Wiegel, H. G. (1998, March). Kindergarten students' organization of counting in joint counting tasks and the emergence of cooperation. *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, 29(2), 202-224.
- Wilkinson, L. C. (1989). Grouping children for learning: Implications for kindergarten education. *Review of Research in Education*, 15, 203-223.
- Wood, Chip. (1997). *Yardsticks: Children in the classroom, ages 4-14*. Greenfield, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.
- Yackel, E., Cobb, P., & Wood, T. (1991). Small-group interaction as a source of learning opportunities in second-grade mathematics. *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, 22(5), 390-408.