Cooperative learning is a common strategy seen in classrooms. Students have the opportunity to work with each other on a common task. This allows for multiple perspectives, ideas, and interpretations to be melded together. Through this collaboration and support, students can draw conclusions and formulate new opinions that may not have been considered otherwise (Lamm, Shoulders, Roberts, Irani, Snyder & Brendemuhl 2012). It is a form of scaffolding that can really benefit student learning and thinking. There are multiple ways of implementing this strategy and that are many aspects to consider. Research shows that you need to consider how to best utilize peer interactions, set expectations, and how to most effectively group students.

Teachers should set expectations for the students when implementing group work. I want my students to know what goal they need to achieve and how they should behavior in reaching that goal. Students working together can allow them to build upon each other’s ideas, but in order for that to happen, students need to know how to participate in group work. A study conducted in mathematics classrooms discusses how important it is to structure group work so that students can make the most of the experience. If the group work is not structured, it is likely to become a situation of students working individually on a common task (Jorgensen & Nieshe 2008). If I outline how the students should behave, then the students will know how to interact with each other and collaborate with their thinking.

One of the examples is when I set rules for group work in the classroom. This will explicitly outline the behaviors I required when working in groups. These group work expectations can be set at the beginning of the year and review them as necessary to ensure that students are prepared to participate in group tasks. We did this through a class discussion and
brainstorming a list of behaviors that the students and I agreed should be seen during cooperative learning.

By having a list of group work rules, the students know the expectations. I had the students gather on the rug to discuss what group work looks like. From there, we developed a list of rules for group work. This gave the students a sense of ownership over the rules as well as a firm understanding of the expectations. Student learning benefitted from this exercise because once I gave the group task, the students immediately started working with the information and each other appropriately. There was minimal confusion about how the students should participate, which allowed the students to spend their time critically thinking and effectively learning cooperatively. Instructional time was not wasted on behavior management, rather the students spent their time actively learning. One student in particular usually is very confused when she has to work on an assignment without direct involvement of the teacher. For this activity, she understood what she had to do and had the support of her peers to figure out her role in the group. Even when she had moments of confusion, she relied on her group members to help her understand. I believe this is because she was explicitly taught how to participate in group work. At the end of the group task, the students were able to have a class discussion about the material, showing understanding and higher-order thinking.

One major change I would make to this would be reviewing it before each group task. I explicitly outlined the group work rules before having students participate in a jigsaw and the task went smoothly and students showed understanding of the information. I implemented another jigsaw a few days later and did not review the group work rules and I saw a distinct difference in student behavior. There was significantly more confusion and time lost because
students were unclear about how to effectively work with each other. To fix this, I will make sure to consistently review group work rules.

I also used group role cards during group tasks. These outlined different roles to be assigned to students. Depending on the role, students had varying responsibilities and jobs. This structure is in line with Jorensen and Nieche’s research because having roles gives students a strong structure to complete the group task. The students have clear, definitive duties, which helps break up the task and ensures equal participation of all students. I did this in a WebQuest task by listing roles to be assigned to different students, breaking up the work and setting the expectations for each individual.

If I implemented this WebQuest with the group roles, I could assess student learning through a rubric that reflects on the responsibilities of each student as well as the task as a whole. By assessing each student’s work and the overall task, I could see whether or not all students participated equally and understand the material. If each student completes the responsibilities of his/her role, then I could effectively assess their understanding of the material.

Now reflecting on this, there is one change I would make to this activity. I would also have the students reflect on the process and experience of group roles, which would give me insight to how the students worked together as a team. By having the students reflect, I would be able to note if any students relied on their team members to complete their responsibilities or if a student took over the responsibilities of another. This would be extremely helpful because if the students do not all participate through their roles, then they are not actively working with the material and there is a strong possibility that they have not learned the intended information.
I believe that one of the strongest, most effective ways students learn is through peer interactions, which are a huge aspect of cooperative learning. Students interact with each other to achieve a common task. There are many different approaches and beliefs about cooperative learning, including the cognitive elaboration approach. This approach focuses on active knowledge construction by students through peer interactions. The elaboration aspect of the approach refers to when students use original examples, new representations, and describe concepts to other students with a strong emphasis on verbalizing ideas. This elaboration allows for different perspectives and perceptions of the material, which could be more meaningful to students than a teacher-explained approach. With modified, student-based perspectives of information, co-construction of knowledge can occur, allowing students to better understand the information (Starrman, Krol, & Meijden 2005).

One example of this form of peer interactions is a jigsaw activity. Jigsaw activities require students to work with multiple groups of peers to learn about new topics, then explain that new information to other students. This process directly fits in with the research outlined by Starrman, Krol, and Meijden because the students must verbally explain their assigned information to their peers in their own words. I did this in my regular education student teaching placement by having students use the jigsaw process to learn about the South African economy, seen in my South African economy Lesson Plan. Each student was responsible for one of three topics and then returned to his/her original group to teach the other students about what they had learned. One student usually has difficult with elaborating on her ideas in writing, but during this jigsaw, I saw her thoroughly explain and elaborate verbally on her understanding of economy. She, and other students who prefer to speak and discuss rather than write, did particularly well with this activity.
I mainly used observation as a formative assessment to judge student learning by walking around the groups to listen to the students explain their topics. If the student was able to effectively and accurately explain the concept in his/her own words, then it was clear he/she had understood the material. I also had a closing class discussion where all of the students had the opportunity to share what they had learned and ask further questions. After the discussions came to an end, I had students fill out an exit slip covering the various topics of the jigsaw activity. This allowed me to see what information the students retained from the lesson. While I was able to listen to many students explain themselves through discussion, this gave me evidence for every student. One of the students who was very quiet during the whole class discussion at the end of class was able to complete the exit slip correctly. She knew the material and just was not comfortable sharing out in front of the whole class. Since this exit slip included information relevant to each subtopic, I was able to assess whether or not students understood all of the material and if the jigsaw activity was successful.

I found this jigsaw activity to be extremely effective and the students really seemed to learn the information. Furthermore, they really enjoyed the process and felt a sense of ownership over the material because they knew they were responsible for teaching others. This really motivated the students to take the activity seriously. One group of students was particularly engaged during this activity and during my African poetry unit, they decided to write poems about the South African economy. If I were to use a jigsaw activity again, I would emphasize how every student is responsible for knowing all the material, not just his/her subtopic. Setting this expectation makes it more likely for students to remain engaged during all parts of the jigsaw process.
When implementing cooperative learning groups, students can either be arranged in homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping. Some teachers prefer to consistently use one type of grouping, others try to incorporate both. Research shows that there are advantages and disadvantages to both styles of groups, which is also dependent on the subject matter. Some argue that students benefit from being grouped with others on the same academic level while other educators will argue that matching lower-achieving students with higher-achieving students will help the low-achieving students gain a better understand while the higher-achieving students benefit from “teaching” the material to their peers. One study conducted researched grouping students based on what type of problem solvers they are. The authors concluded that depending on the task and student learning preference, utilization of a balance of homogenous and heterogeneous grouping is recommended (Lamm, Shoulders, Roberts, Irani, Snyder & Brendemuhl, 2012).

I implemented both homogenous and heterogeneous grouping in my regular education placement. For guided reading groups (group discussion cards), I worked with groups of students who were at the same reading level: a homogenous grouping approach according to the framework. Students also worked as a group without me as a facilitator while I met with other groups. This enabled me to address the students’ specific needs at the correct instructional reading level. Since the students were at the same level, they were able to converse and discuss topics with each other. It also helped me focus on challenging each group instead of having some students being challenged and others breezing through the material and readings. On days that I did not meet with certain groups, they worked together discussion questions they developed during independent reading time. By being grouped homogenously, the students benefitted from being at the same level. They were able to work at the same pace, understand
the text, and effectively discuss each other’s questions. Also, since the students were roughly at the same level, one student did not take over the group and run it.

I assessed student learning through running records done regularly throughout the school year as well as formatively assessing students through observations and notes during guided reading sessions. The running records allowed me to track student growth or decline, which helped make sure that students were in appropriate groups. The main difficulty I had with the guided reading groups was making sure I met with each group regularly. It is very difficult to manage multiple reading groups considering there were multiple reading levels within the class. Some days, I would not get to meet with every group. To try and solve this problem in the future, I would try and arrange time during an intervention block or maybe have a readers’ lunch with guided reading groups to make up time. I also need to work on better planning for the higher-achieving students so that they can meet without me on days that I do not see their group. Through meticulous planning and instruction prior to group meetings, I could better provide them with the skills needed to run a guided reading group without the facilitation of a teacher.

I used heterogeneous partner grouping during a folktales lesson and a persuasive writing unit during my regular education placement. I choose partners for the students prior to the activities so I could arrange them in ways I thought would most benefit their learning. For example, there was a student who rushed through her work and then generally hands in work that does not reach her potential. I grouped her with a student who is very thoughtful and plans when working on an activity. This helped slow down her work pace and had her take more time to think about the task as she worked.

The students did very well working in mixed grouping. The students were really motivated during these activities. For the most part, the lower-achieving students and the
slower-paced students helped their partners take more time to read and digest the material. In one partnership, I observed a higher-achieving student explaining a part of a folktale to his partner, not only showing he really understood the material, but by teaching his partner, he reinforced the information he had learned. This also benefited the lower-achieving partner because they got to hear the material from the perspective of a peer, which is likely easier to understand than from other sources. The most exciting part of the persuasive writing partnerships was when a pair of students decided they wanted to write a persuasive letter together to ask the principal if they could start a food drive for the children in Africa we learned about in Social Studies. They not only understood how to apply persuasive letters, but they also actually applied their knowledge in a real-world context.

Looking back, I think I should have had the students complete an evaluation of working in their partnerships. This would have given me some insight into which students enjoyed working with someone at a different level than themselves and which student found it frustrating. This could help my future instruction because I could create groups accordingly, some being homogeneous and some being heterogeneous. This balance would help all students be in grouping that benefits their learning preferences.

Reflecting on my teaching experiences, I implemented cooperative learning strategies often in my instruction. I found it to be effective overall. The students were able to learn from each other, not just me as the teacher. I believe that students have added motivation when they are responsible for their own learning. Furthermore, it gives them a better understanding of the material when they are actively working through it and digesting it through peer interactions. Cooperative learning can be used in an array of approaches, but I believe there should be a balance of homogenous and heterogeneous groupings to ensure all students have opportunities to
excel based on how they learn best. With that said, it takes extensive work and planning to prepare students to work with each other with the teacher as a facilitator. Setting expectations helps guide and structure cooperative learning to make it more effective for students. Prepared students will gain more from cooperative learning since they know what is expected throughout the process and what goal they need to work towards.
References


