



Teachers' perspectives on implementing cooperative learning to promote social and emotional learning

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ABSTRACT

Evidence has shown that social and emotional learning (SEL) improves students' behavior, attitudes, peer relationships, and academic outcomes. However, teachers have challenges in promoting SEL due to insufficient professional development and pedagogical strategies. Cooperative learning, a pedagogy promoting student-centered learning, has been suggested to help teachers foster students' SEL. However, little research has been conducted to investigate cooperative learning alignment with SEL. Thus, this current study explores teachers' perspectives on implementing cooperative learning to promote students' SEL. Seven elementary school teachers implementing cooperative learning and SEL in their classrooms joined the study. A qualitative interpretative case study design was used. Teacher interviews as primary data, and field notes, teachers' artefacts, lesson plans, and teaching videos were collected. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data from the teacher interviews and field notes. Four themes were generated: group roles, exploring potentials and weaknesses, meaningful interactions, and consensus decision-making. The findings suggest that cooperative learning through clear group roles promotes elementary school students' self-awareness and social awareness, meaningful interactions, and consensus decision-making

Keywords: cooperative learning; social and emotional learning; teachers' perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to a set of educational and life skills that are designed to help students understand themselves, manage their emotions, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Weissberg et al., 2015). SEL research has evolved over several decades. Early research into SEL began with scholars like Erik Erikson, who explored the stages of psychosocial development (Corcoran et al., 2020; Syed & Fish, 2018), and Lawrence Kohlberg, who developed a theory of moral development (Corcoran et al., 2020). SEL programs and practices can be seen as a practical application of psychosocial development theory. SEL programs equip individuals with the skills to navigate psychosocial challenges. For example, during adolescence, students experience Erikson's identity versus role confusion stage, where they grapple with questions of identity and self-concept. SEL programs can help students develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills, which are crucial for resolving this stage's challenges. SEL programs can contribute to moral development by providing the social and emotional skills needed to navigate moral dilemmas and make ethically informed decisions (Corcoran et al., 2020). Then 1994, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was established (CASEL, 2015). CASEL plays a significant role in advancing SEL research, development, and implementation in educational settings. Their efforts have been influential in shaping SEL (Weissberg et al., 2015).

SEL has been extensively researched and implemented in the US and other countries since its establishment and has gained positive outcomes. In 2011, Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis study reviewing 213 school-based SEL programs involving 270,034 students from kindergarten to high school, and they reported that students involved in SEL interventions had enhanced social and emotional abilities, academic attainment, attitudes, and behavior. Another meta-analysis study conducted in 2018 by Mahoney et al. found more promising results. They found that universal school-based SEL programs benefit students by the positive change in their behaviour and academic outcomes after the intervention and after follow-up periods. The most current meta-analysis examining 424 studies from 53 countries from 2008 through 2020 found similar results: SEL program interventions improve students' attitudes, behavior, peer relationships, and academic achievement and improve school climate and safety (Cipriano et al., 2023). However, some critics argue that measuring the effectiveness of SEL intervention is challenging. Assessing changes in social and emotional skills can be subjective, and standardized tests may not fully capture the complexity of these outcomes.

Although studies of SEL school interventions have yielded positive outcomes, there have been challenges in implementing SEL programs. Thierry et al. (2022) reported that counsellors implementing SEL programs experience a high level of burnout due to insufficient support from leaders and teachers. The counsellors in their study reported that they could not carry out other duties, such as conducting diagnostic testing and working with individual students. Thus, they may be unable to provide sufficient service to assist students in implementing SEL. Hemphill et al. (2021) have also raised the issue that SEL programs are not racially sensitive. They argue that SEL programs do not consider the experience of coping with racism for Black students in the US. Earlier et al. (2018) offered a transformative SEL (TSEL), which suggests that TSEL is "a process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences, learn to critically examine root causes of inequality, and develop collaborative solutions to community and societal problems." Challenges in SEL implementation have also been reported by Niles' (2021) study. Niles describes that the teachers in the study need continuous professional development of SEL implementation and student-centered pedagogy to promote SEL. One of the pedagogies that supports the implementation of SEL is cooperative learning (Dyson et al., 2020; Dyson et al., 2021; Johnson & Johnson, 2009b).

Cooperative learning is a pedagogical model that creates small groups in a class where members are positively interdependent to achieve a shared goal. It has been studied for more than five decades. Hundreds of studies have shown that cooperative learning improves students' cognitive and affective achievements (Sharan, 2010), social and academic benefits (Cohen & Lotan, 2014; Gillies, 2014; Johnson & Johnson, 2009a), cross-ethnic friendships (Cohen & Lotan, 2014), and self-esteem (Modaber & Far, 2017; Sadeghi & Ganji, 2020). The success of cooperative learning depends on implementing its elements (Johnson & Johnson, 2009a). Johnson and Johnson (2009a) propose five elements to create a successful group: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interactions, appropriate use of social skills and group processing.

Cooperative learning is a transformative pedagogy promoting SEL (Dyson & Baek, 2023; Johnson & Johnson, 2009b). Johnson & Johnson (2009b) argue that to be able to promote SEL; schools are required to build positive interdependence and positive relationships among the people in the school – principal, teachers, students, and parents, and moral characters are practiced. One way to achieve this is through cooperative learning, creating a learning community (Johnson & Johnson, 2009b). Further, Dyson & Baek (2023) argue that cooperative learning, through its principles, helps students increase their SEL skills. For example, positive interdependence, in which everyone in the group is positively linked to achieving group goals (Johnson & Johnson, 2009a), trains students to use positive behaviors and consider their groups' emotions and performance (Dyson & Baek, 2023). Individual accountability helps students improve their potential to assist their group mates and increase their performance, thus fostering their self-awareness and social awareness (Dyson & Baek, 2023).

Some research has explored the implementation of cooperative learning to promote SEL that yields positive outcomes in New Zealand (Dyson et al., 2020; Dyson et al., 2021) and the US

(Low & Van Ryzin, 2023). The New Zealand physical education teachers in Dyson et al. (2021) reported that students build social skills and relationships through cooperative learning by teaching their teammates. Further, in the US, Low and Van Ryzin (2023) found that CL significantly improves students' positive peer relations and social competencies in the experimental groups of six schools. To date, however, little research has been carried out in Indonesia. Although cooperative learning has been implemented for more than two decades in Indonesia, research on cooperative learning has extensively focused on the effectiveness of cooperative learning structures (Fuad et al., 2023; Kurjum et al., 2020). Therefore, we aim to explore Indonesian teachers' perspectives on implementing cooperative learning to promote SEL.

METHOD

We employed an interpretative qualitative case study design (Stake, 1995) to explore participants' perspectives on implementing cooperative learning to foster elementary school students' social and emotional learning. We conducted our research at one of the elementary schools in an urban area in Malang City, Indonesia. The school offered an international class program that used national and international curricula. Seven teachers in the school, teaching different subjects such as mathematics, science, civics, and English, agreed to participate in this current research. They have undergone professional development in cooperative social and emotional learning and are currently implementing cooperative learning. They had an 8-hour workshop on cooperative learning, which focused on creating effective groups, and 8 hours of workshops on social and emotional learning for their professional development. They agreed to participate in this research, and consent had been sought from the school principal, teacher participants, and students' parents. Table 1 describes participants' names (pseudonyms), the subjects they taught, teaching experience, and experience using cooperative learning.

Table 1. Participant demographics and experience of using cooperative learning

No	Names	Subjects	Teaching experience	Experience using cooperative learning
1.	Yolanda	Mathematics	16 years	2 years
2.	Miranda	Science	16 years	2 years
3.	Laily	English	16 years	2 years
4.	Lucinda	Mathematics	20 years	2 years
5.	Kelly	English	3 years	2 years
6.	Farah	Science	10 years	2 years
7.	Audrey	English, Civics	20 years	2 years

Interviews were employed as the main data source to get insights into the participants' viewpoints. Field notes were utilized to record our immediate observations and informal talks with the participants throughout the study. We collected teaching documents such as participants' lesson plans, teaching artefacts, and short videos they took during their teaching.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each teacher participant at a time convenient to them. Interviews took approximately 45-60 minutes and were transcribed soon after the interview. The interview questions were grounded on the theories of cooperative learning (Cohen & Lotan, 2014; Johnson & Johnson, 2009a) and social and emotional learning (CASEL, 2020; Jagers et al., 2019). We asked the participants about their experiences in implementing cooperative learning to foster SEL. Some of the questions are "Could you describe your cooperative learning lesson in your class?", "What are the group roles that you used in your class?" "How did you promote self-awareness in your cooperative learning class?" "How did cooperative learning help students make responsible decisions?". The interviews were recorded and transcribed. We sent the interview recording and transcripts to teachers as a member check to check the data's accuracy and improve the research's credibility (see Guba, 1981). Data from the field notes and participants' interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis by Braun and Clark (2012). We listened to the recording and read the transcripts repeatedly to

gain familiarity with the data and to create initial codes. The codes were then reviewed and collated to find themes to answer the research question.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding

Four themes were generated from participant interview data and field notes. The themes are *group roles, exploring potentials and weaknesses, meaningful interactions, and consensus decision-making*.

Group roles

All teacher participants reported assigning different roles to the students when they worked in cooperative learning groups to improve the positive interdependence and individuality of the members. The roles were leader or manager, speaker, writer or scribe, and inquirer. Each teacher participant had a different way of informing the students about the jobs of each role. Kelly, for instance, used a cartoon character along with its roles and jobs on a piece of paper that she put inside an envelope. She explained:

“I used cartoon characters in SpongeBob movies to assign roles to the students; Mr. Crab is the manager or leader, SpongeBob is the inquirer, Patrick is the writer, and Squidward is the speaker. ... I gave a little description of the role. You are SpongeBob. You love to ask questions. Only you can ask the teacher any questions.”

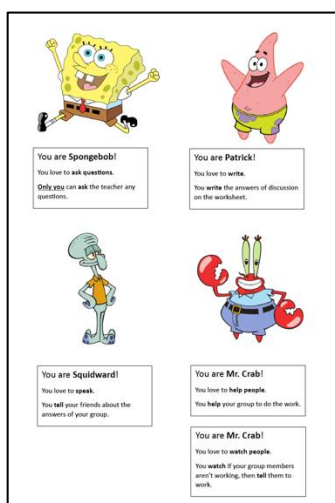


Figure 1. An artifact from Kelly's class

Further, Audrey discussed with her students the roles and responsibilities. She reported, “The first time I introduced roles in the class, I involved them to make decisions. I typed the results of the discussion on a PPT [projected to the wall] so everyone would be responsible for their roles.” Audrey commented that the leader led the group, the writer was responsible for writing the results of the discussion, the speaker presented the results of the discussion, and the inquirer would ask questions and give comments during the whole class presentation. The other five participants used similar roles and responsibilities as Audrey and Kelly. However, Lucinda and Farah added that the inquirers and speakers could ask questions to help inquirers seek answers to the mathematics problems.

The teacher participants described that the roles helped their students become positively interdependent and accountable members. Farah described that the group members would need to work together to achieve the goal. She gave an example in her science class that many groups could not turn the lamp on, and without the inquirers, they could not ask questions to the other groups that had been successful in their experiments. The inquirer's job was to ask questions. Her class was learning about series and parallel circuits. Moreover, Lucinda revealed that in her

mathematics class, the leaders of the groups needed to make sure that everyone in the group understood the concept so that everyone was accountable; thus, everyone could explain the concept. She estimated that "... more than 70% of the students understood the new concept.", higher than she expected. Similarly, Yolanda assigned the high-achieving students to be the leaders in teaching new mathematics concepts to their groups. It is noted that the participants were aware that group composition played a significant role in creating an effective group. All participants reported choosing the groups based on their academic competence, characters (such as outgoing, reserved, quiet, chatterbox), and gender. Farah thought that putting all quiet students in one group would not make the group positively interdependent.

Exploring potentials and weaknesses

Seven teachers reported that cooperative learning helped students find out their own potential and weaknesses, and the students were more aware of their classmates. Miranda stated that she rotated the roles so that everyone got equal opportunities to be leaders, speakers, inquirers, and scribes. She added, "To be a leader is not easy because they must be able to manage their group. I want my students to try different roles so that they can see their potential." She mentioned that one of her students, who was reserved, had to be a leader, so he had to manage the group. Miranda was surprised that the student could carry the job and submitted the project on time.

Audrey perceived that cooperative learning helped her two students in her class who had additional needs: one was a low-achieving student, and the other one was suspected of having social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD), were able to carry out the tasks and gained their classmates' trust. She explained:

"I want my students to trust that they [the low-achieving and SEBD students] are as capable as the others. ... I learned that Ari [pseudonym, the low-achieving student] writes very slowly, but he can speak normally. So, I asked the group to assign him as a speaker. He successfully carried the job and gained his mates' trust. ... Now, no group rejected him because they know [his mates] that he is good as a speaker in the group."

Audrey further reported that cooperative learning had helped the student with SEBD manage his emotions and develop his relationships with other classmates. She added, "It increases his sense of belonging in the class; he might feel accepted, and his friends listen to him more." Audrey mentioned that he did not want to join any group work before she implemented clear roles and rules. She said, "He felt like no one listened to him and trusted him to do the job, then he would get angry. He had tantrums if he could not get his way."

Kelly also believed that cooperative learning improved her students' self-awareness. She said, "I believe that my students know what they are capable of. By having a role in the group, they feel that they are equal in the group, so they do the best for the group. They respect others more." In addition, Yolanda mentioned that in the group, students could learn social skills. She said, "... for example, a self-centred student learned that in a group, he/she had to consider other people's feelings, and by doing that often, he/she became more considerate."

Laily commented that when in groups, students learned from each other thus, they increased their understanding towards other members. She said:

"...there [in the group], the students not only learned about the content or did the task, but they learned to deal with other mates, and they learned to listen when their group mates convey their ideas and to respect different perspectives. They become socially aware."

Similarly, in her mathematics class, Lucinda noticed that her students respect each other space and roles. She stated, "They knew what their jobs were and reminded their mates if they were not focused. They said, 'Please stay focused, and let's finish the task.' [Lucinda copied her students' utterances]." Lucinda further explained that the students knew the group expectations and reminded their group mates to stick to their roles to achieve common goals.

Meaningful interactions

The theme of *meaningful interactions* is found across the participants. All teachers reported that from their past experiences, asking students to work in groups without clear roles and rules would not engage all students. Clear rules and roles help elementary students to stay focused and increase meaningful interactions. Miranda reported that at the end of the class, she asked her students about how the group went, "My students reported that they were more engaged and had good discussion because everyone knew what they were doing." Similarly, Kelly mentioned that the second-grade class was noisy, but "it was a meaningful noise". She said, "During group work, they [the groups] were all chatting, but I could hear that they discussed the task." Audrey and Lucinda commented that their class had engaging conversations. They sent us some videos of their classrooms and some short videos that showed the discussions that happened in the group. This is what we saw from Audrey's class:

"The students were sitting in groups of four. Each group sat in a square; two students sat opposite the other two. The leader chose the one who would talk first in the discussion. The group started to respond to the questions [that Audrey gave]. They were telling their group mates which planet they wanted to go. Occasionally, they pointed at the planets in the book (Field notes)."

Audrey confirmed what we described. She further stated that the groups stayed focused until the end of the session. Similarly, we saw similar interactions in Lucinda's class. Lucinda chose high-achieving students to be the leaders to teach their mates. In the video she sent, we saw a group of two girls and two boys discussing the task. A boy was talking to the group and seemed to be explaining a Mathematics concept; one of the girls was writing, the other two were listening, and occasionally, they looked at their books or talked to the other members (Field notes).

Consensus decision making

In response to the question of whether cooperative learning helped students make responsible decisions, all participants reported that the students made decisions in many learning phases, and they got used to making decisions based on the group consensus. They described that when members chose the roles, they had to be responsible for the jobs in each role. Miranda said, "They [the members] had to be responsible for the roles. I saw them doing the best they could." Yolanda reported a similar opinion, "My students learned how to make decisions in deciding the roles that took, and they must be responsible with that. My students make a lot of decisions during the class." She gave an example of how the students made choices in mathematics.

"To give you [interviewer] an example, in mathematics class, I usually give the class some ways to solve mathematics problems. ... after discussing with the group, they would come up with an answer, and if they make mistakes, no one would be blamed because it is a group decision. I think it is a good practice for them."

Kelly described that the groups kept making decisions throughout the discussions, especially when they had to work for a certain period of time. She said, "The groups had to be focused and make good decisions because I gave them time. They knew that they would be in trouble if they could not do it on time." Miranda also had a similar story. She narrated,

"... There was one group that was not ready to submit their infographic project at the end of the session. They decided to finish in the break time. They learned how to be responsible for finishing the task on time and manage their time better."

The group in Miranda's story showed that they had to take responsibility for their actions before submission.

Discussion

This current study aims to answer teachers' perspectives on implementing cooperative learning to foster elementary school students' SEL. We generated four themes from teacher interviews that answered the research question, and we found how cooperative learning is a promising pedagogy that supports the teachers in our study to promote the SEL skills of their elementary school students.

The current study shows that through clear group roles, everyone in the group has an equal opportunity to contribute his/her share. A manager or a leader in the group will not be successful in leading the team if he/she cannot communicate well with his/her team. A team will not be successful if the writer and speaker do not collaborate with the inquirer to seek knowledge from the other groups or the teacher since only the inquirer can ask questions. Farah's example shows that the team relied on the inquirer to get the lamp on. Students develop social, personal, and interpersonal skills through these communications as important social and emotional learning skills. With these skills, students could maintain good relationships with peers and adults (Dyson et al., 2021; Dyson & Baek, 2023). Further, to be positively interdependent, every group member needs to give their best and create 'responsibility forces' (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). The teachers in this current research created a learning community (see Johnson & Johnson, 2009) or learning teams (see Dyson & Casey, 2016), which in the long term, will promote prosocial behaviour. Research on prosocial behavior at elementary schools shows that prosocial behavior decreases peer rejection and improves peer acceptance (Caputi et al., 2012; Guo et al., 2018). We learn from Audrey that through learning teams, her students, who had additional needs, were accepted by their peers. Further study must be conducted to provide empirical evidence for this claim.

The findings of this current study reveal that teacher participants perceive that learning teams with clear roles foster elementary school students' self and social awareness. Doing different roles such as leaders, speakers, inquirers, and scribes requires skills in managing groups, teaching, communicating, offering help, listening, taking turns, respecting others and their ideas, formulating ideas, asking questions, and making decisions (see Gillies, 2016). The students would explore different roles, practice the skills, find out what they could do, and build social relationships. These skills are important in social and emotional learning. Similar research findings have been reported (Dyson et al., 2020; Dyson et al., 2021; van Dijk et al., 2020).

Further, this current study reveals that cooperative learning has been reported to impact the students' sense of belonging to students with additional needs. Two of Audrey's students with additional needs were more engaged with their groups as they carried out their roles better; thus, they improved their relationships with the group and their self-belonging to the class. Self-belonging and engagement are crucial in building social awareness and responsible decision-making (Jagers et al., 2019). Responsible decision-making was present throughout the cooperative learning lesson in this current study, for example, when the group chose the roles, although occasionally the teachers chose the role for them, and when the students had to make decisions in relation to the tasks. Based on the evidence, we would like to argue that cooperative learning promotes individual responsible decisions and consensus-responsible decision-making.

The teacher participants in this current study also perceived that group roles in cooperative learning decrease inequalities in task distribution, thus improving students' equal participation and engagement (Slavin, 1989). Careful planning in assigning students for each role will create higher engagement (Cohen & Lotan, 2014). Kelly, for example, prepared cartoon characters in the *SpongeBob SquarePants* movies that her second-grade students were familiar with to excite them about the roles and increase their involvement in the task. As engagement increases, meaningful interactions happen, and relationship skills are promoted.

Meaningful interactions in this current study mean that the interactions in the group were circled around the tasks and interactions in completing the tasks. Similar findings were found in van Dijk et al. (2020) research. Through heterogeneous groups, elementary students in the Netherlands improved their positive interactions about the content (van Dijk et al., 2020). The teacher participants in this current study reported that the strategies to engage the students were heterogeneous group composition and clearly assigned roles for each member. Yolanda and Lucinda purposefully assigned high mathematics achievers as the leaders of the groups because they wanted these students to coach their teams. Heterogeneous grouping is suggested to be implemented in teaching concepts that need higher cognitive processes (Cohen & Lotan, 2014), improving students' literacy (Murphy et al., 2017), and cooperative dialogue (van Dijk, et al., 2020). Heterogeneous grouping and clear roles work best for elementary school students because

they provide structure and organization to group activities, help students understand their responsibilities within the group and ensure that each member has a specific task to focus on.

CONCLUSION

The current study's findings represent elementary school teachers' perspectives about implementing cooperative learning to promote SEL. The teacher participants perceive that clear group roles and job responsibilities help elementary students become positively interdependent and accountable, thus promoting self-awareness and social awareness and increasing a sense of self-belonging to the class, particularly evident for students with additional needs. In addition to that, group roles create meaningful interactions because the students are on task, thus fostering relationships among group members. Finally, the current study also reveals a significant finding that cooperative learning promotes consensus decision-making, a decision that is based on a communal agreement and consequences, if any, are shared among the group members. These findings support Johnson & Johnson's (2009b) and Dyson & Baek's (2023) notion that cooperative learning is a pedagogy that promotes SEL. Our findings show that cooperative learning nurtures elementary school students' practice of making decisions based on mutual agreement. In the context of Indonesia, it is a very important skill to acquire as consensus decision-making (*musyawarah*) is one of Indonesia's core values (Karmina et al., 2021). Further research is urgent to examine whether cooperative learning will sustainably impact SEL skills.

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