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DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIO-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE
THROUGH COLLABORATIVE LEARNING
IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract

The classroom should feel like a family and every student can fulfill his potential. Collaboration strategies can be powerful tools for teachers in order for them to facilitate an atmosphere of trust and a sense of belonging. Through cooperation children can learn about themselves and about other as well. They can learn to work together to find solutions to problems or to discuss other topics of interest. Collaborative learning refers to situations when learning occurs in classroom groups or pairs. There are many benefits to collaborative learning that include: developing oral communication, self-management, student-student interactions, understanding diverse perspectives of society. The teacher has to navigate with confidence when addressing problems of logistics and infrastructure in the classroom or school. Addressing the problem correctly and honestly teachers can find that collaborative learning has always been happening in their classrooms and maybe even in their schools. Students have a tendency to work together and try to solve their tasks during a school day. Teachers need to develop a more meaningful approach when it comes to creating a collaborative environment where the pieces of the learning process are fit together and the results are relevant to students' learning experience. This paper focuses on the approaches, resources and tools needed to create a classroom where the students can have a collaborative learning experience which helps them achieve their potential.

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1. Introduction

School is an environment in which the child spends most of the time (with the introduction of the After-School program in Romania) and it constitutes a framework in which both children and adults are studying and socializing. The environment that the school offers for the development of a small school child is a framework in which it manages to develop harmoniously by acquiring information to work with basic notions (math, reading and writing), but also with elements related to social-emotional development - form and sustain positive relationships, experience, manage and express emotions, explore and engage with the environment. For healthy emotional development, the child must have previously acquired skills such as self-esteem, self-confidence, curiosity, motivation, perseverance, and self-control. These abilities develop in the context of a balanced family where the child develops in harmony, the relationship between child and parent being an important aspect in his development. The results of the studies conducted by Lozada and Halberstadt (2015) show that emotional competence is closely related to social competence, this connection being conceptualized with the help of the phrase "affective-social competence" (Schaffer, 2010).

Social and emotional learning is a way for children to develop skills, attitudes and behaviours that help them cope effectively and ethically in their daily challenges. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2017) is a framework that has at its core the development of intrapersonal, interpersonal and cognitive competence. The five core competences that are being taught in concern with CASEL are:

- Self-awareness – the child can listen to his feelings, thoughts and actions
- Self-management – making responsible choices, communicating clearly
- Social awareness – understanding social and ethical norms
- Relationship skills – establishing and maintaining healthy relationships
- Responsible decision making – making constructive choices in concern to personal and social interactions

The awareness for these competences has been a focus for educators and policymakers. The new curriculum based on competence has made a long transformation since its predecessor that was based solely on object learning. The role of the teacher has known a redefining step as to establish new views on teachings: instruction has become learning, exterior learning was replaced by individual learning, iconic learning transformed into meaningful learning. Planning for lessons in this context offers opportunities for implementation of new teaching directions and creates an environment for diversity of methods for teaching. This new planning has principles (Wiesner, 2013) that have to be implemented in order for meaningful learning to occur:

- Individual learning oriented teaching
- To be in accordance with the new teaching evolution of methods
- Diversity in method – cooperative and collaborative learning – project based learning, problem solving, brainstorming, cooperation learning
- Using the new information technologies

2. Literature Review

The benefits of collaborative learning have been researched for more than fifty years with the implementation of the long term research developed by Johnson and Johnson (1999). Collaborative learning has a different approach than teacher-centred in the classic classroom (Laal & Laal, 2012). When taking into consideration a collaborative classroom the settings are different than in your average classroom important elements stands out – active work and discussion. Working in teams has the power to generate trust among the group and a sense of belonging and responsibility. In this sense building social and emotional connections with their peers has a more meaningful aspect. Relevant to this type of classroom are the interactions that occur between pupil-pupil and teacher-pupil (Hernández-Sellés, Muñoz-Carril, & González-Sanmamed, 2019).

Johnson & Johnson (1999) based on their research have identified five basic elements that have to be used for a situation to be cooperative:

- **Positive Interdependence** – it relies on pupils working together to maximize the learning of all members of the group through shared resources, providing mutual support, and celebrating their joint success.
- **Individual accountability** - exists as long as the teacher is able to give individual feedback and also group feedback is shared to the group.
- **Promotive interaction** – achieving goals through common efforts and supporting of one another in order to complete tasks.
- **Social Skills** – how well pupils engage in targeted social skills must be shared individually with each pupil for it to be effective.
- **Group processing** – giving feedback on helpful and unhelpful actions among the group members at the end of the studying session proves to be effective and stating the decisions to continue the project.

Collaborative learning was more effective in attaining results than competitive and individualistic approaches (see table 1).

Table 01. Mean effect sizes for impact of social interdependence on dependent variables (Johnson & Johnson, 1999)

	Coop vs. Comp	Coop vs. Ind	Comp vs. Ind
Achievement	0.67	0.64	0.30
Interpersonal Attraction	0.67	0.60	0.08
Social Support	0.62	0.70	-0.13
Self-Esteem	0.58	0.44	-0.23
Perspective-Taking	0.61	0.44	
Learning Together, Achievement	0.70	0.91	0.08
Controversy, Achievement	0.61	0.86	

Note: *Coop- cooperation

*Comp – competitive

*Ind- individualistic

Putting effort into cooperative and collaborative approaches give better result than competitive and individualistic ones and these results create opportunities for positive interpersonal relationships and greater psychological health (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Working collectively to reach and complete goals requires pupils to seek opportunities for practice and reflection on their social and emotional competencies along with their academic development. Thoughts become actions and the results of those actions influence how children think and interpret the reality (Manea, 2014). Making responsible decisions creates a framework for new ideas and skill development along with building relationships with colleagues and teachers (VanAusdal, 2019).

There are certain mechanisms that contribute to a successful collaborative learning environment. Nokes-Malach, Zepeda, Richey, and Gadgil (2019) have addressed these mechanisms and drawn on two types of factors – cognitive factors and social factors:

- Cognitive factors
 - complementary knowledge – combined knowledge benefits the group
 - cross-cuing – recalling information by one member of the group and shares it for the whole group
 - re-exposure – recalling in a group creates a chance for an information to be recalled by other members of the group
 - error-correction – gives an opportunity for critique and inquiry
- Social factors
 - joint management of attention – sharing attention
 - the construction of common ground – group understating benefits the collaboration learning process
 - the negotiating of multiple perspectives – creating opportunities for new information to be shared to all the members of the group.

Teachers have to understand the settings of the classroom as a whole and to be able to build on the curriculum using meaningful approaches. There are certain skills that are useful in these new situations of learning: understanding the nature of positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing, and to develop skills in structuring them

3. Research Method

The current paper recounts the collaborative situations of a classroom of 24 children from the preparatory grade until the fourth grade – their graduation from primary school. The method used by the teacher to assess the development of the children through collaborative learning was the feedback of parents and also the children, along with teacher's assessment thought-out the years

3.1. Setting the scene for collaborative learning

The consensus that we have in the Romanian public school is that the children should always face front when in the classroom and the desks are most likely set in a classic classroom order: rows of one, two or even three desks together. Considering the classrooms in primary school in big towns are large and consist of more than 30 to 32 pupils this arrangement for the desks seems properly adjusted to this current

setting. The teacher sits in front of the classroom and pupils are facing front for the blackboard. Since the curriculum is designed in such a way that children in lower grades don't learn from the blackboard anymore seems an opportunity to move on from this setting. There are some disadvantages for this classic scenario: pupils always sit at the same desk, interaction between them is not always possible, some pupils have to sit in the back and some always in the front, movement between the desks is restrained..

3.2. The collaborative classroom

The teacher acts as a facilitator and establishes the classroom for the pupils that include diverse and flexible social structures for the scope of promoting the kind of classroom behaviour that seems appropriate for communication and collaboration. Teachers often develop collaboratively rules and conduct with pupils and review or change them when the situation arises.

Another important aspect in the collaborative classroom is to establish a feedback loop. This instrument is helpful for the teacher to make adjustments to his methods in accordance with the pupil's feedback and needs. The results of different interaction between the children in the classroom create new directions for the teacher which in turn analyzed the feedback and implements the new changes in the children's best interest and the loop begins again. The constant feedback gives the children opportunity for expression of their needs and the teacher can immediately react to these requests. The three stages of feedback in the classroom would be: gathering the information, learn from the information and apply the new methods from the results.

Heterogeneous groupings of students constitute an advantage for this use of collaboration between children. Usually children from the same classrooms are divided between themselves, but with collaborative strategies this can be avoided and children can benefit from each others helpful information. Children can benefit by this exposure to different learning skills and styles of their colleagues. By constantly regrouping the children in the classroom and assigning different themes the children can experience different scenarios and can learn how to deal with challenges and learning conditions.

3.3. Case study

The children in the classroom in question have been assigned at least to one group of the five that the class provided. The groups had names that at first were given by the teacher but as the years progressed the children were able to name the group based on similarities among themselves or favourite things or even pop-culture. The naming of the group was always made at the group's decision and the children always kept the name chosen. The different projects that the children had to make during their school years focused on developing core social and emotional learning competence (CASEL, 2017): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision making, relationship skills.

Based on the assertive tools for collaborative learning, the teacher tried in making children aware of the importance of respect for others, respect for time and space of colleagues, self-esteem, and challenging them to work on classroom and group goals.

Students have learned about the new tools they can use in the context of their personal management both in their relationship and with others. They have enthusiastically embraced this approach in trying to solve their daily problems that challenge them (see table 2). In groups, the students identified the problems encountered and offered the first steps to solve them in free and moderate didactic

framework discussions. Students are aware of the importance of communicating through solutions to solve problems. Discussions based on the information mentioned by the students led to the creation of a list of priorities for the achievement of the goals of each team. For feedback children write periodic appreciation, critic or thanks to their colleagues or their teachers.

Table 02. Activities of the pupils in the collaborative learning process

Activities	Time	Person responsible	Methods used
<i>Challenging situations</i>	8 weeks/	Teacher	Problem solving/Brainstorming
<i>Kudos box</i>	8 weeks/permanent	Teacher/pupils	Game – feedback cards
<i>Fourth grade celebration</i>	3 weeks	Teacher/pupils	Documentation, improvisation, scene writing

4. Analyses and Findings

The celebration of the fourth grade at the end of the year proved to be an opportunity for children to use their skills acquired in their previous years. All the children had either individual projects or group project at their choosing. The tools used by the children varied and were in accordance with their ultimate goal. The project managed to give the children the opportunity for expression and learning experiences for being better with each other and be more careful about what is happening around them.

5. Conclusion

Collaborative learning has proved to be a useful tool along the teaching years in the classroom. Children are provided with learning opportunities and are able to develop skills necessary for the XXI century. Giving a voice to children and allowing them to organise themselves but being in constant control can have a deep impact on their perception of general requirements in life and also the challenges that are so present. Changing the roles of children in the group benefits the child and the group as well and give a perspective of different roles that the children can have and can also find the things that they are good at in school life and in general.

Together, the children and the teacher will be able to find the best solutions to the challenges that arise in a collaborative classroom. The projects should be diverse, the participants being always challenged in listening and being listened to. Collaborations should always have a focus on current themes in relation to what is happening in pupils' lives and together with them the results should be synthesize in the most effective way for solutions to be discovered and applied properly.

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