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Cooperative Learning: Cooperative Learning as a transformative pedagogy in physical education

Cooperative Learning is a dynamic pedagogical model that allows the teacher to teach diverse content to students at different grade levels. Students work together in small, structured, heterogeneous groups to master subject matter content. The students are not only responsible for learning the material, but also for helping their group-mates learn (Dyson & Casey, 2012). Cooperative Learning has been used in general education for over 50 years and it is likely that you have seen teachers using it in core subjects, such as, Math, Literacy, and Science. More recently, there has been increased interest in and research on Cooperative Learning in Physical Education, and the publication of a book *Cooperative learning in physical education: A research based approach* (Dyson & Casey, 2012).

In Physical Education teachers often state that they are doing Cooperative Learning but this is based on the fact that students are grouped together or are working together. Yet this doesn't mean they are using Cooperative Learning. In reality, many educators have only a superficial understanding of the knowledge and the practice of Cooperative Learning in general education (Antil, Jenkins, Wayne, & Vadasy, 1998) and particularly in Physical Education. In order to actually be using Cooperative Learning as a pedagogical model and not just working together or using team games, five critical elements of the model act as explicit guidelines in its successful implementation: Individual accountability, Promotive face-to-face interaction, Interpersonal skills and small group skills, Positive interdependence, and Group processing (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). In this paper I will briefly describe these five elements, particularly focusing on group processing, which is frequently overlooked by teachers.

Individual accountability refers to students taking responsibility for completing their part of the task for their group and learning something in the process. For example, accountability strategies like 'student task sheets' can hold students individually accountable and create a situation where assigned tasks are more explicit for students.

The next Cooperative Learning element, *Promotive face-to-face interaction* is often undervalued and misunderstood. In Cooperative Learning in Physical Education we want students to feel physically and emotionally safe (Dyson & Sutherland, in press). That is, small groups or teams are nurtured and created to have an explicit role as encourager, someone in close proximity who gives promotive or positive comments to other members of the group.

The next element, specially related to the development of interpersonal and social skills, is listed as a goal of curricula and national standards across the globe. Look at Strand 5 and 6 from the US National Standards or the curricula from Spain, New Zealand, the UK, Australia, France, Germany, and Israel (Dyson & Casey, 2012). *Interpersonal and small group skills* are student behaviors that allow comfortable and relaxed communication between group-mates. These are developed through the tasks in which students participate and may include listening, shared decision making, taking responsibility, giving and receiving feedback, leading, following, and encouraging each other.

In many ways in Physical Education we are already experts when it comes to the next element – *Positive interdependence*. That is to say we often set up activities that require students to rely on each other to complete the pre-designed task, i.e. 'we sink or swim together' (Dyson & Casey, 2012). In Physical Education we already do a great job of developing positive interdependence with our students and many academics in other subject areas refer to working together on a sports team. In Physical Education and sport we are familiar with many examples of positive interdependence. In fact, every team sport requires it to be successful. Whether it is working in a volleyball team to develop three hits, or performing part of a dance, or holding up the rugby scrum, students or players are positively interdependent on each other.

In the rest of this editorial I will focus on one of the critical elements of Cooperative Learning: Group processing. The most unique and perhaps the most important element for Cooperative Learning in Physical Education is *Group processing*. My definition of Group processing is borrowed from Outdoor Education, Adventure

Based Learning, and Project Adventure (Dyson, 1995; Sutherland 2012). This group processing differs from the notion of group processing in general education (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), which has more emphasis on student evaluation. Group processing is best understood as a reflective, guided discussion that is student-centered, therefore guided by the students rather than driven by the teacher. Group processing is an affective and cognitive task and often is represented during the physical education lesson as 'strategizing', that is, the students in their team talk about and create an offensive or defensive strategy (Dyson, Linehan & Hastie, 2010). In Group processing, team members work towards constructing meaning from the task, activity, or game they have just participated in (Sutherland, 2012). Through the experience of group processing students learn to apply this meaning to other situations in their lives. This transfer of learning to another setting could be in another class, outside in the playground or at home with their family. Don Hellison (2011) has also promoted transfer of learning as an important concept in Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility but many educators struggle to see the implementation of this concept in their programs. When a teacher is highly skilled at group processing they can use this teaching strategy throughout their lesson, not just as a concluding or closure portion of a lesson. For a detailed structure for Group processing read Sue Sutherland's work (Sutherland, Stuhr, & Ressler, 2012).

Ukopodu (2009, p.5) talks about teaching strategies that represent a transformative pedagogy. She discusses inviting students to "check in" at the beginning of a lesson sharing their concerns, questions, and issues and then uses a "debrief" at the end of each experience in an open-ended dialogue to stimulate self-reflection and thinking. Essentially Ukopodu (2009) is referring to Group processing to promote a democratic and student-centred pedagogy.

Merely putting students in groups is not taking full advantage of all benefits that Cooperative Learning can offer. I trust that this editorial has inspired you a little bit and hope you all consider Cooperative Learning as a pedagogical practice and urge you to learn more. When using Cooperative Learning as a transformative pedagogical practice please pay attention to group processing so that your students will gain the most from their learning experiences.

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Cooperative learning is an educational approach which aims to organize classroom activities into academic and social learning experiences. There is much more to cooperative learning than merely arranging students into groups, and it has been described as "structuring positive interdependence." Students must work in groups to complete tasks collectively toward academic goals.