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ABSTRACT
                This paper reports research into the effectiveness of
cooperative social support groups as a means of empowering students to solve
their own personal and social problems. A descriptive study using
ethnographic techniques was used in the natural setting of one fifth-grade
elementary school classroom. Theoretical framework involves the
interconnection between achievement motivation and affiliative motivation;
specifically, this paper provides a microanalysis of student perceptions and
student interactions within a cooperative learning context and relates to the
use of base groups to enhance student empowerment. Base groups, a cooperative
learning structure of three or four students, were established by the teacher
for a period of 1 year. Purposes of the groups were: (1) to provide support
for students to solve personal and social problems; (2) to provide a
structure for teaching and to reinforce social and cooperative skills.
Results are presented under three headings: (1) prevailing antecedents toward
the use of base groups; (2) students' perceptions of base groups; and (3)
outcomes from the use of base groups. Findings establish that base groups
facilitate student empowerment, particularly as students are enabled to solve
their own personal and social problems as the need arises. Recommendations
for teachers establishing base groups are presented. (Contains 31
references.) (EMK)

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An Investigation into Empowering Students through Cooperative Learning

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Abstract

This paper reports research into the effectiveness of cooperative social support groups as a means of empowering students to solve their own personal and social problems. A descriptive study using ethnographic techniques was used in the natural setting of one fifth-grade elementary school classroom. Base groups, as a cooperative learning structure, were established in this class. The findings revealed prevailing antecedents toward the use of base groups, students' perceptions of base groups and outcomes from the use of base groups. This paper discusses these findings and it is established that base groups facilitated student empowerment, particularly as students were enabled to solve their own personal and social problems as the need arose. Finally, some issues teachers could consider are presented.

An Investigation Into Empowering Students Through Cooperative Learning

Anna Sullivan and Leonard King

This paper reports research into the effectiveness of cooperative social support groups as a means of empowering students to solve their own personal and social problems. Specifically the aim of the study was to:

1. Examine students' perceptions of empowerment through cooperative support groups.

2. Analyse interactions during cooperative support group meetings.

3. Help establish the nature and degree of connection between the use of cooperative support groups and fulfillment of the teacher's affective intent.

Theoretical Framework

Recent motivation research has emphasised the interconnection between achievement motivation and affiliative motivation (social motivation) (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996). Affiliative motivation focuses on the intrapersonal and interpersonal needs of all students within the classroom, which can be considered as affective aspects of learning. Student empowerment has been recognised as an important feature of affiliative motivation.

Student empowerment is generally defined as a philosophy that creates an atmosphere in which individual students are supported by the classroom community to take responsibility for their lives in trying to meet their needs within learning settings (Sullivan & King, 1998). Empowerment has both interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions. Interpersonal empowerment occurs when individuals or groups work *with* each other to meet their needs (Brunson & Vogt, 1996; Kreisberg, 1992; Paz, 1990). Intrapersonal empowerment is when someone has belief in his or her ability or capability to act (Ashcroft, 1987). Given the growing call over the last ten years for students to be empowered (Coll, 1986; Cumming, 1993; Duhon-Haynes, 1996; Kreisberg, 1992; Schneider, 1996; Stone, 1995) there would appear to be a major need for studies that describe and analyse the construct of empowerment within a normal classroom setting. This paper reports such an investigation.

Within their work on cooperative learning, Johnson and Johnson referred to the use of base groups to provide academic and social support (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Johnson, Johnson, &

Holubec, 1994). Johnson et al. (1994) defined base groups as "long-term heterogeneous cooperative learning groups with stable membership that last for at least a year" (p. 8). Such use of base groups seems to be an appropriate mechanism for enhancing student empowerment particularly in terms of resolving social and personal problems through discussion.

This paper is a response to a call for microanalysis studies of student perceptions and student interactions within cooperative learning contexts. Meloth, Deering and Sanders (1993) have suggested a framework for studying cooperative groups. This framework consists of a series of connections between the teacher's intent for learning, the nature of the conditions and structures established for cooperative work, the kind and quality of student interactions, and the fulfilment of intended affective learning. The question pursued in the study reported in this paper related to the use of one structural condition, base groups as facilitating the fulfilment of the desired affective outcomes, especially student empowerment.

Methodology

This research was part of a wider investigation into examining what is student empowerment and how it is manifested in a classroom that uses cooperative learning as a teaching strategy. A descriptive study using ethnographic techniques was used in the natural setting of an elementary school classroom. A purposive sample of one fifth-grade class, including the teacher and students, was studied. Techniques used for data collection were interviews, observations, and field notes.

Interactions during student and teacher initiated base group meetings were audio taped and observations of meetings were made. Informal and semistructured interviews, that were also taped, were held with participants in response to observer-as-participant observation. Field notes, including descriptions, points for clarification and reflections, were also kept.

Data Source

Data were collected through observations, field notes, audio taped discussions and interviews. Initially, field notes were analysed after each period of fieldwork in order to establish questions for further investigation. All interviews and group discussions were transcribed verbatim and memos written on areas identified for further investigation. Completed transcripts were read and preliminary coding categories recorded against units of data. Regularities, patterns and topics were identified to initiate the establishment of coding categories. Moreover, irregularities were sought. Words and phrases that represented these patterns and topics were then recorded and called coding categories. Initial coding categories were assigned to data to test

the "workability" of the categories. Modifications were made which included adding new categories, discarding and merging other categories. Finally, the categories were clustered into themes and verified with the original data.

Findings

Base groups were a cooperative learning structure established for the period of one year. The purposes of base groups were (a) to provide support for students to solve personal and social problems, and (b) to provide a structure for teaching and to reinforce social and cooperative skills. The teacher established the base groups using affective criteria based on the students' suggestions and her own opinions. Base groups were heterogeneous and consisted of three or four members.

In analysing the descriptive data obtained, the findings of the study are presented under three key headings, namely (a) prevailing antecedents toward the use of base groups, (b) students' perceptions of base groups, and (c) outcomes from the use of base groups.

Prevailing Antecedents

Some prevailing antecedents included teacher beliefs and expectations about the purposes of base groups, and some conventions adopted by base groups. Teachers probably need to embrace the belief that all students at some stage will experience times and happenings that produce tension or conflict and that these need to be resolved for effective classroom motivation.

Teacher beliefs and expectations about the purposes of base groups

From the data, it was possible to extract three significant beliefs the teacher, Gemma, had which related to base groups. First, Gemma believed that students should be encouraged to seek help and support from each other. She recognised that students often had problems and believed that they did not learn effectively unless steps were taken to address or solve the problems. She believed that students should learn to solve problems independently with the support of their peers because adults would not always be available to help. Furthermore, students should be aware that other people have problems and should learn ways to support them. Gemma encouraged students to solve personal and social problems and seek support from their base group. Gemma explained:

> We have them [base groups] so that if they [students] have got a problem, instead of coming to me to solve their problem, that they can work together to solve the problem.

> Problems come up all the time. They meet together ... to talk about it [the problem] and go through a process of what that person can do. (Int, Gemma, 31/7/97)

Second, Gemma believed that students learn more effectively when their social needs are met and therefore it was important to address these needs. She attempted to be aware of and cater for students' social needs. To support students, Gemma actively taught social skills. For example, on one occasion a parent expressed concern for her child who was having trouble with friends. Gemma thought this child's problem could have been that he was "on the fringe" of groups and he needed to develop more confidence to join a group. Gemma gave the base groups an activity to help students improve their skills for joining a group and to help students improve how they included others in a group (Field notes, 29/7/97).

Third, Gemma believed that although some students learn social and cooperative skills from seeing other people use them many do not and, therefore, the skills should be taught. Gemma defined social skills as skills that help people interact and relate to others and cooperative skills as skills used by a group to effectively work together towards a common goal. She explained:

> I suppose it [teaching social skills] is probably one of the highest priorities because if the kids aren't happy at school, if they're not happy in the environment, and they don't get on in the environment, then learning's going to be the least of their worries and they're not going to learn. Ultimately they are there to learn, but we need to make an environment where they are happy to learn and are comfortable. (Int, Gemma, 5/8/97)

Gemma established base groups as a structure from which students could seek support and to facilitate teaching social and cooperative skills. She encouraged students with personal or social problems to seek help from their base group. Students gave each other support by talking about the problem and discussing what the person could do to find a solution. Supported by base groups, students were enabled to meet their social needs. Gemma formally taught social and cooperative skills using base groups. The class would focus on a particular skill and consider what the skill looked and sounded like. The students then practised the skill in base groups using role-play.

Conventions adopted by base groups

There were many conventions adopted by base groups, which are outlined in this section. The teacher or individual students called base group meetings. The teacher called weekly base group meetings so students could discuss issues of concern, such as personal and social problems, and to teach and reinforce social and cooperative skills. Individual students called

meetings whenever they had a problem that they wished to discuss. When students called base group meetings they would check with the teacher if it was appropriate to hold a meeting and then inform the group members that they had called a meeting. The students would find a place outside the classroom, but within a short distance, where they could talk in private. The group would sit at the same eye level in a circle.

All meetings were confidential. The teacher did not listen or join in unless invited and the students did not reveal details discussed in meetings. However, a rule set was that if at any time a student was or could be hurt a teacher must be informed.

The format of meetings involved stating and exploring the problem, discussing options for solving the problem and some possible consequences. The student who owned the problem then selected an option and the situation was reviewed in subsequent meetings. "Meeting language", taught and modelled to students, enabled base groups to run meetings according to a format.

Problems students discussed during the meetings were of a personal or social nature and most were related to their friends. Other problems included students who were annoying them, being treated unfairly by a teacher, incidents that occurred in and out of the classroom and trusting another member of a base group. Some problems were ongoing and students discussed them repeatedly during meetings. Students seemed to be aware of the importance of following up problems and asking each other to report to the group. Base groups were given adequate time to work through the process of solving problems.

All talk during base group meetings was either "on-task" or exploratory in nature. Generally, the students remained on-task, but when the conversation explored issues in more detail, someone usually brought them back on-task after a short time to discuss the problem at hand. For example, on one occasion Simon said, "Well we should get back to the problem. We've just got two more minutes. The problem really is we have to get ..." (Base group meeting, 18/8/97). Students were clearly aware of the need to stay on-task and they closed meetings when there were no further problems to discuss or students perceived they had met for long enough. Both forms of talk were important as they provided opportunities for students to reach new understanding.

On occasions, particularly when problems were ongoing, base groups called other students who were involved with the problem to meetings. To help resolve the conflict the group members used basic conflict resolution techniques. The teacher had modelled these techniques when resolving conflicts between students. Calling students into base group meetings did not occur without firstly trying to resolve problems through other means. Students accepted being called into base group meetings as part of the problem solving process. When called into base

group meetings, students felt comfortable as they were treated with respect and the climate was friendly and non-threatening.

During the base group meetings, students used many social and cooperative skills. Students usually took turns to speak, used people's names and gave eye contact. All group members were encouraged to contribute to discussions sometimes by invitation. Students helped groups by guiding the discussions forward. Individuals achieved this by redirecting an exploratory discussion to more on-task talk by restating the problem or indicating time remaining. Students gave verbal and non-verbal support to each other. They demonstrated an awareness of not hurting other people's feelings. Individuals readily revealed their feelings, and accepted and valued the feelings of others. Students expressed empathy, especially when they were trying to establish reasons for an individual's behaviour. When appropriate, students used conflict resolution skills.

Students exhibited many cognitive skills during base group meetings. Information was given as students recounted personal experiences and gave summaries of what had been said or decided. Students expressed opinions supported by reasons, justifications or information, criticised views of others and defended personal positions. To elicit information, clarification, opinions and explanations, students asked many questions. Reflective listening was used to clarify feelings and meanings. Students identified and clarified problems. Options for solving problems were explored and some possible consequences were considered.

Gemma explicitly taught many of these cognitive, social and cooperative skills to students and she modelled others. Peers also modelled skills in base group meetings. Learning these skills enabled students to take responsibility for staying on-task and to run effective meetings.

In summary, both the teacher and students called base group meetings. The teacher called meetings to teach and reinforce social and cooperative skills. Students called meetings for a purpose, their own purpose, specifically when they had personal or social problems they wished to discuss. Once students had discussed their problem and selected an option for solving the problem, students seemed much happier to continue with their work.

Students' perceptions of base groups

The students' perceptions of base groups included choosing to use base groups and base groups as a support structure. Students regularly chose to seek personal and social support from base groups. They were aware there were other avenues available to seek support but many students indicated that they preferred to discuss problems with their base group. Students appeared to assume responsibility for solving their own problems readily. They perceived that it

was possible to solve their problems and thought it was normal to seek support in the process. Students were confident working through the problem solving process.

Students perceived base groups as a positive support structure for making decisions. More specifically, students thought their base groups provided support in much the same way as their families. Generally students perceived they could trust their base groups and they explained this was because group members were expected to keep discussions confidential. Students considered their base group members as friends.

Outcomes from the use of base groups

Several outcomes were discerned for both students and the teacher and in terms of the classroom environment. Base groups as a cooperative support mechanism or structure seemed to function as a means of attending to the students' affiliative needs within learning situations. Some of the needs that were facilitated by base groups included a sense of belonging, a sense of "voice" or influence, an ability to solve one's own problems of a personal and social nature, and a fulfilment in terms of social support on social and personal concerns. Satisfaction of these needs seemed to contribute to interpersonal and intrapersonal student empowerment.

Another outcome for students was that base groups enabled them to pursue their own agendas. Socialisation in meetings occurred without adult interference and so students were able to discuss issues that were meaningful to them in a manner that was accepted by them. Students were able to establish their own culture.

Outcomes for the teacher included observing students solve their own problems independently with support from their peers. Gemma indicated that students did not approach her very often to seek help leaving her with more time to attend to other matters. Sometimes base groups met when Gemma was giving students information, which meant she had to repeat the information to students or students would have to obtain it from peers. Gemma did not mind repeating information to students as she thought it was more important that students solved their problems when they arose.

For the classroom environment, outcomes included helping establish a cooperative learning community and a positive social learning climate. Students seemed happy to work with everyone and they demonstrated a caring attitude by readily helping and supporting each other. In base groups students resolved conflicts as they occurred which impacted positively on the overall classroom environment, particularly behaviour management.

Discussion

The most important aspect of this study was that cooperative support groups facilitated student empowerment. This importance becomes clear when we address the questions that guided the study: What are students' perceptions of empowerment through cooperative support groups? What were students' interactions like during cooperative support group meetings? What is the nature and degree of connection between the use of cooperative support groups and fulfillment of the teacher's affective intent?

Students' perceptions of empowerment through cooperative support groups

In this study, base groups were a mechanism that had a positive impact on student-student relationships in the class and possibly influenced motivation and learning. This mechanism encouraged students to accept their group members and furthermore, students encouraged each other to accept their peers during the process of sharing and solving problems in base groups. Base groups seemed to provide students with a sense of relatedness. It has been established that a sense of relatedness in the form peer acceptance has more influence on one's self-esteem than acceptance from friends (Harter, 1996). Furthermore, peer acceptance has been linked with student academic performance, school affect and attitudes (Birch & Ladd, 1996). Therefore, base groups seem to have potential to influence students' self-esteem, motivation and learning. Even those students who did not have quality relationships with their peers seemed to have a sense of relatedness with base group members. Therefore, base groups possibly helped alleviate students feeling a sense of isolation from peers and gave students a sense of control in obtaining personal and social support. A sense of isolation and lack of control have been linked with low levels of achievement (Epperson cited in Wentzel, 1996) suggesting that base groups could moderate this. Students perceived their base group members as caring and supportive and thus were likely to adopt prosocial and socially responsible goals (Wentzel, 1996). Students who exhibit prosocial and socially responsible behaviour have been linked with academic success. In other words, students who have a sense of relatedness with peers and perceive their peers as caring are more likely to achieve at school.

Students perceived they could trust their base groups and the development of this trust seemed essential to the success of this mechanism. The crucial elements of trust were evident in the base groups that enable productive student cooperation. These elements are "openness and sharing, which are determined by the expression of acceptance, support and cooperative intentions" (Johnson & Johnson, 1994, p. 195). Trust is very important in developing the social

climate of learning environments and to the learning of group members (Cahn, 1986). In addition, stable cooperation and effective communication depend upon a high level of trust within a group (Barnes & Todd, 1977; Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Base groups helped build and maintain a trusting climate in the classroom, which seems essential for effective learning to occur.

Students seemed to have a sense of empowerment in both the interpersonal and the intrapersonal domains. Students worked with each other in base groups to meet their needs, which suggests they had interpersonal empowerment. In addition, students perceived they were able to solve their own personal and social problems with the support of their base groups suggesting students had intrapersonal empowerment. A trusting climate supported students to gain this sense of empowerment.

Interactions during cooperative support group meetings

Base groups were a structure that seemed to encourage the development and maintenance of peer culture as students were able to pursue their own agendas and gain control over their lives through communal sharing (Corsaro, 1985; Davies, 1982). Moreover, students were able to affiliate with each other. The peer culture in this class coexisted with the school culture. Enabling peer culture to develop and function alongside of school culture could lead to social and cognitive gains (Danielewicz, Rogers, & Noblit, 1996).

Base groups provided students with opportunities to learn and practise social, cooperative and cognitive skills leading to students utilising skills of a sophisticated level. Many of skills were explicitly taught to students and the teacher modelled others providing opportunities for learning (Good & Brophy, 1978). Peers also modelled skills in meetings. An advantage of students working in cooperative groups is that they "witness others' enactment of each of the roles, roles that correspond to thinking strategies that they must subsequently perform independently and silently" (Brown & Palincsar, 1989, p. 401).

Cognitive skills exhibited during base group meetings reflected categories identified by Bligh (1986) for taking account of major forms of cognitive activity at the undergraduate level. The categories were (a) giving an opinion, (b) giving information, (c) arguing, (d) asking for information, (e) clarifying, (f) formulating problems, and (e) group processes. This suggests that the cognitive activity demonstrated in the base group meetings of grade five students was of a high level.

On-task talk and exploratory discussion occurred during base group meetings providing opportunities for students to reach new understanding. Therefore, it is important to recognise

both forms of talk are significant for students in constructing knowledge and that collaboration alone within groups is not sufficient (Barnes & Todd, 1977).

Students gave help, verbal and non-verbal support and showed concern to each other in base groups. Moreover, peers were respected and valued. This kind of experience can be described as "high-quality" (Battistich, Solomon, & Delucchi, 1993, p. 19). Base groups met regularly and students had frequent high-quality experiences. Research shows that frequent high-quality experiences are linked with positive classroom environments, increased self-esteem and greater intrinsic motivation (Battistich et al., 1993).

Therefore, interaction in base group meetings enabled students to establish and maintain a peer culture, to use and develop sophisticated social, cooperative and cognitive skills, and construct new understanding. Student interactions during base group meetings were of high quality.

The nature and degree of connection between the use of cooperative support groups and fulfillment of the teacher's affective intent

The teacher's affective intent for base groups was to meet students' affiliative needs by establishing the cooperative support groups from which students could seek support. Students were empowered to solve their problems with support from peers. Being able to call a base group meeting at any time meant that students were able to attend to their concerns and return to their work promptly.

The effectiveness of base groups can be attributed to the teacher's beliefs and expectations about the purposes of base groups, the conventions adopted by base groups, and the students' perceptions of base groups. Furthermore, two components necessary for effective cooperative learning identified by Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (1994) were evident in the base groups. That is, face-to-face promotive interaction occurred, and interpersonal and small group skills were explicitly taught and used enabling students to run meetings effectively.

Finally, for effective student motivation in classrooms, research has indicated teachers place a strong emphasis on meeting students' affiliative needs (Juvonen & Nishina, 1997). Student empowerment has emerged as an affiliative need of real salience. The literature suggests that teachers need to take account of student empowerment through their approach to teaching (Luechauer & Shulman, 1992) and to the establishment of certain classroom structures (McQuillan, 1995). The use of base groups, as observed and analysed in this study, indicates positive outcomes derived from a cooperative support group mechanism. Students gain from the use of base groups especially in affiliative terms. There would appear to be a connection between genuine satisfaction of affiliative needs and approaches to learning (Juvonen & Nishina, 1997).

Teachers seem to gain through better classroom management and the emergence of cohesive classroom community (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992).

Conclusions

This study found that the teacher deliberately promoted student empowerment by establishing base groups and encouraging the use of these groups for students to solve their social and personal problems. Base groups enabled student empowerment in both the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions which are interconnected. Consequently, teachers can enable students to attend satisfactorily to their concerns related to these dimensions and thereby allow student empowerment to prevail. This study portrays the effectiveness of one particular mechanism that worked successfully at empowering students interpersonally and intrapersonally in one elementary classroom and justifies Johnson and Johnson's (Johnson & Johnson, 1994) identifying of base groups as a means of social support.

Research has shown that attending to affiliative motivation mediates the quality of student learning. Students called base group meetings when they had a social or personal problem that was significant to them. Having such a problem could have interfered with learning. The social support of base groups allowed students to air and resolve problems in a manner that was acceptable to students concerned. Cleared of this intervening obstacle, students were able to proceed with learning in a much more positive way.

Teachers should probably reflect on the extent to which students' personal and social problems affect the quality of learning. Furthermore, teachers should weigh up this affect on student learning against allowing students to call base group meetings at any time to solve their own problems. This study has shown that the benefits were overwhelmingly positive when the teacher chose to help students solve their problems by establishing cooperative support groups.

Additionally, teachers should consider the importance of peer culture to students. This study has shown one effective way in which a teacher fostered peer culture in a classroom. There are many possible educational implications of enhancing peer culture in this manner, which include better classroom management, increased class cohesiveness, cooperation between students and meeting the affiliative needs of students.

Base groups were feasible as a cooperative support group mechanism. Teachers wanting to implement base groups with their students should consider some important elements that made them feasible in this study. First, teachers should consider their personal beliefs and expectations about the purposes of such a mechanism. Second, the structure of base groups is important. For example, students were able to call meetings at any time they had a matter of concern. In

addition, established conventions enabled students to run base group meetings independently and effectively. Third, the impact on the student-student relationships should be taken into account as meetings enabled students to gain a sense of relatedness and helped develop a peer culture. Addressing these elements should enable teachers to implement successfully base groups as a cooperative support group mechanism.

There has been a growing call for students to be empowered yet few studies have described and analysed student empowerment or examined how students can be empowered in the classroom. This paper reports a study that found cooperative support groups are a mechanism that enhances student empowerment. In particular base groups enable students to solve their personal and social problems. A microanalysis of student perceptions and student interactions during cooperative support group meetings, or base group meetings, has provided a greater understanding of the connections between intent, conditions, structures, interactions, and learning.

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