

Enhancing Social Skills in Early Childhood through Cooperative Learning: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Background of the study: Social skills are essential in early childhood development, shaping how children interact, collaborate, and communicate with others. Cooperative learning has emerged as an effective instructional model to nurture these skills within early education settings. At TK Permata Hati, a cooperative learning approach has been implemented to address challenges related to low confidence and limited social interaction among children. The school seeks to create a supportive, inclusive environment that encourages participation and peer engagement.

Aims and scope of paper: This study aims to examine the implementation of the cooperative learning model at TK Permata Hati and its role in enhancing the social skills of young learners. The focus is on how structured group activities, such as discussions and role-play, foster collaboration, sharing, and verbal communication among students.

Methods: This study used a qualitative case study design, the research involved observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Participants included the school principal, teachers, and students from Group A and B. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of teaching practices and children's responses in the cooperative learning environment.

Results: Findings revealed that cooperative learning significantly improved children's social abilities. Children became more willing to cooperate, take turns, and express themselves verbally. Previously reserved students showed increased confidence and engagement. Activities like role-playing enhanced both academic understanding and empathy. However, challenges such as varied developmental levels and time constraints were identified. Solutions included balanced group arrangements and the use of engaging learning media.

Contribution: The study affirms cooperative learning as a valuable strategy in early childhood education. It supports children's social and academic growth while emphasizing the need for adaptive teaching methods. The findings offer practical implications for educators in fostering inclusive and interactive classrooms that support holistic development.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a critical period for holistic development, particularly in shaping children's social skills which are essential for building positive relationships, effective communication, and collaborative behaviors (Denham et al., 2015). In this stage, education serves not only to stimulate cognitive growth but also to foster socio-emotional competencies that form the foundation for lifelong learning and interaction (La Paro & Pianta, 2017). Social development enables children to learn empathy, cooperation, self-regulation, and conflict resolution (OECD, 2020). Thus, educators play a pivotal role in designing learning environments that support such development.

Significantly enhancing children's social capabilities is crucial during early childhood, as these skills form the foundation for healthy interpersonal relationships and effective communication throughout life. Among the various pedagogical approaches, cooperative learning has emerged as a powerful model that actively engages children in group-based learning experiences (Gillies, 2016). Rather than relying on passive, teacher-centered instruction, cooperative learning encourages active participation, peer interaction, and shared responsibilities (Johnson & Johnson, 2017). This approach aligns well with the nature of early childhood learners who thrive in interactive and play-based environments (Palladino et al., 2021).

At TK Permata Hati, the implementation of cooperative learning—particularly in forms such as group discussions and role-playing—has shown promise in addressing common social challenges such as low confidence, limited peer interaction, and egocentric behavior. By facilitating structured social engagement, children are encouraged to work collaboratively, listen to peers, and practice turn-taking—skills that are fundamental to later success in formal schooling and beyond (Vygotsky, 1978; Slavin, 2014). These cooperative activities not only promote cognitive development but also foster emotional growth by teaching empathy, patience, and respect for diverse perspectives.

Moreover, cooperative learning environments provide opportunities for children to develop problem-solving skills as they negotiate roles and responsibilities within the group. This collaborative problem-solving nurtures critical thinking and adaptability, which are essential in both academic and social contexts (Roseth et al., 2008). The supportive peer interactions characteristic of cooperative learning also contribute to increased motivation and self-esteem, as children receive positive reinforcement from both teachers and classmates (Wentzel et al., 2016). This creates a virtuous cycle where enhanced social skills lead to greater engagement and a more positive attitude toward learning.

Furthermore, the structured nature of cooperative learning helps mitigate potential conflicts and misunderstandings by establishing clear rules and shared goals. In doing so, children learn conflict resolution strategies early, which contributes to a more harmonious classroom environment (Gillies & Boyle, 2010). By experiencing success in these social interactions, children build a sense of belonging and community, which is crucial for their overall well-being and willingness to participate in future learning activities.

In essence, the cooperative learning model at TK Permata Hati is not merely an instructional strategy but a comprehensive framework that supports holistic development. It nurtures children's social-emotional competencies alongside their cognitive growth, preparing them to navigate increasingly complex social settings both inside and outside the classroom.

Despite its benefits, cooperative learning also presents challenges, especially in managing diverse developmental levels and maintaining balanced group dynamics (Ismail et al., 2018). However, when applied effectively with appropriate scaffolding and engaging media, it can contribute meaningfully to both academic achievement and social-emotional growth (Hernández-Ramos et al., 2022).

This study aims to explore the implementation of the cooperative learning model at TK Permata Hati, focusing on its impact on enhancing young children's social skills. By adopting a qualitative case study design, this research provides insights into how cooperative learning

strategies support early childhood social development and offers practical implications for educators.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a field research design (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), grounded in a constructivist perspective to obtain meaningful knowledge (Emzir, 2013). The qualitative approach was chosen to explore in-depth the social skill challenges faced by early childhood students in cooperative learning settings.

Participants

The research participants consisted of various stakeholders involved in the learning process at TK Permata Hati. These included the school principal, teaching staff, facilitators of Group A, and students from Group B. These participants were selected to provide a comprehensive view of the cooperative learning model implementation and its effects on children's social skill development. The teachers at TK Permata Hati observed that some children experienced difficulties cooperating in group activities, such as refusing to share play materials, unwillingness to take on assigned roles in role-playing, or preferring to play alone even during group sessions. This observation underscored the need for a detailed investigation of social interactions within the classroom.

Data Collection

Data collection involved multiple sources to enrich the research findings. Primary data consisted of field data collected through passive participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to directly witness the children's behavior during cooperative learning activities. Semi-structured interviews were held with key informants, including the principal, staff, facilitators, and some students, to capture personal insights and experiences related to the cooperative learning model. Documentation, such as school records and lesson plans, was reviewed to contextualize the findings and verify the consistency of instructional practices. Secondary data included literature relevant to the study focus, such as previous research articles, books, and official documents that provide theoretical and empirical background to the topic.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During data reduction, raw data were condensed, focused, and organized to identify key patterns and themes. The data display stage involved presenting the data in a structured format, such as matrices and narrative descriptions, to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the patterns that emerged, supported by evidence from the data.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, triangulation was employed. This included source triangulation by collecting data from multiple participant groups, and technique triangulation by using varied data collection methods such as observation, interviews, and document analysis. These strategies helped to cross-verify the data and reduce biases, enhancing the validity and reliability of the study.

RESULT

The results of the study at Permata Hati Kindergarten indicate that the cooperative learning model is the primary instructional approach employed. In this model, students work collaboratively in groups to complete learning materials aligned with the core competencies. Groups are composed of students with diverse abilities, ranging from high, average, to low achievers. Additionally, the

group formation considers diversity in race, culture, ethnicity, and gender equity. Cooperative learning emphasizes group achievement over individual accomplishment, teaching students not only to cooperate but also to complete tasks independently while respecting social diversity (Raharjo & Solihatin, 2007).

The distinctive characteristic of cooperative learning lies in its focus on collaborative processes within the group. The goal extends beyond academic mastery to include social cooperation in mastering the material. Teams serve as the core unit of learning, where success is measured by the group's collective achievement. Effective management of cooperative learning requires careful planning, organization of tasks, implementation according to plan, and control or evaluation of outcomes (Sanjaya, 2013). Each group member is assigned specific roles and responsibilities, and an ethos of mutual assistance is fostered, where more capable students support those who need help to achieve shared objectives.

The main objectives of cooperative learning include improving students' academic achievement through interdependence and collaboration. It also aims to cultivate broad acceptance of individual differences based on race, culture, social class, and ability. Through cooperative structures, students from diverse backgrounds learn to appreciate these differences. Furthermore, cooperative learning plays a vital role in developing social skills such as communication and collaboration, which are essential competencies often lacking in young learners (Isjoni, 2013).

According to Roger and David Johnson (as cited in Lie, 2002), five essential elements must be present for effective cooperative learning: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, interpersonal communication, and group processing. In practice, each student is responsible for their own task, contributing to the group's success. Both individual and group assessments motivate students to perform their best without feeling inferior. Groups are provided opportunities for direct interaction and discussion to foster synergy and maximize collaborative output. Teachers also play a critical role in teaching communication skills, ensuring that students can listen attentively, express opinions clearly, and engage respectfully in group dialogue.

The cooperative learning principles implemented at Permata Hati align with those described by Hamdayama (2016), including positive interdependence, individual responsibility, face-to-face interaction, and active participation and communication. These principles ensure that group members depend on one another, take responsibility for their tasks, interact directly, and communicate effectively throughout the learning process. Teachers prepare students with communication skills such as active listening, polite disagreement, and constructive expression before engaging in cooperative activities.

The cooperative learning process at Permata Hati follows six key phases: presenting learning objectives and motivating students, delivering information, organizing students into learning groups, assisting group work, testing the material, and providing rewards. Each phase supports students in understanding learning goals, collaborating within groups, and receiving recognition for individual and group efforts.

Observations reveal that, with a class of 12 students guided by one teacher, cooperative learning significantly enhances student engagement. Children demonstrate improved abilities to cooperate, share ideas, and respect peers' opinions. Group activities such as discussions, educational games, and simple projects effectively boost motivation and self-confidence. Moreover, social skills such as communication, sharing, and conflict resolution show marked improvement, fostering empathy and solidarity from an early age.

Despite its benefits, the study also identifies challenges: shy or introverted children require more time to adapt to group-based learning, and classroom management remains demanding to ensure all students participate actively. Therefore, the use of instructional aids like visual media and educational games is recommended to increase the method's effectiveness. Integration of project-based curricula is also advised to deepen children's learning experiences.

DISCUSSION

The cooperative learning model implemented at Permata Hati Kindergarten aims to enhance children's social skills, communication, and teamwork. Observations revealed that this approach engages children in small group discussions, team-based activities, and sharing of work outcomes, which prevents social exclusion or selective friendship. Teachers act as facilitators, providing guidance and direction during activities, shifting away from traditional lecture methods that tend to make children passive learners. This approach fosters a more interactive and enjoyable learning environment.

Supporting these findings, Sumyadewi (2021) demonstrated that the application of the Jigsaw II cooperative learning model, supported by concrete media, effectively improves early childhood mathematics ability. Learning mastery increased from 70.83% in cycle I to 91.67% in cycle II, highlighting the benefit of heterogeneous group learning that encourages cooperation and mutual assistance in understanding material.

While cooperative learning shows clear advantages, it is important to contrast it with competitive and individualistic learning styles. According to Slavin (in Triyanto, 2007), competitive and individualistic approaches can motivate students to do their best; however, they also present drawbacks such as unhealthy competition, decreased motivation among lower-achieving students, and potential frustration leading to widening achievement gaps.

Further evidence from Rukmana Sari et al. (2014) supports the positive impact of cooperative learning techniques like the “kancing gemerincing” (jingle button) method in increasing children's concentration. Their study at TK Islam Permata Hati Surakarta showed a rise in concentration mastery from 54.7% before the intervention to 91.7% after two learning cycles, emphasizing the role of fun group activities in boosting attention and focus.

Additionally, Prabandari and Fidesrinur (2021) found that cooperative play methods effectively enhance cooperation abilities among 5–6-year-old children, allowing them to better interact socially, share, and solve tasks collaboratively—key elements in social character development. Similarly, Sriyanto and Fatonah (2023) applied the Make a Match cooperative learning model to stimulate mathematical logic in early childhood. Their results indicate improvements not only in children's logical abilities but also in their social skills through paired card-matching activities.

Implications

The findings underscore the significance of cooperative learning models in early childhood education for developing both academic competencies and essential social skills. Educators should incorporate cooperative learning strategies that promote inclusive group work, active participation, and peer support. This shift from traditional teacher-centered methods to student-centered approaches can cultivate a positive learning atmosphere that motivates all children, especially those who may struggle in competitive or individualistic settings. Moreover, educational stakeholders should consider training teachers to become effective facilitators capable of managing diverse groups and encouraging equitable participation, which are critical for the success of cooperative learning.

Research Contribution

This study contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing the effectiveness of cooperative learning models in early childhood education, particularly within Indonesian cultural and educational contexts. It validates previous research by demonstrating how various cooperative learning techniques (e.g., Jigsaw II, kancing gemerincing, Make a Match) can improve not only cognitive skills like mathematics and concentration but also essential social-emotional competencies. These insights provide practical guidance for curriculum developers and educators aiming to foster holistic child development.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the scope was limited to a single kindergarten, which restricts the generalizability of the findings across different regions or educational contexts. Second, data collection relied heavily on qualitative observation and limited quantitative measures, which could benefit from more rigorous experimental or longitudinal designs to measure sustained impacts. Third, variations in individual children's temperaments, such as shyness or introversion, were not deeply explored, which may affect their participation in cooperative learning.

Suggestions

Future research should expand to multiple early childhood education settings to increase the generalizability of findings. Employing mixed-method approaches that integrate quantitative assessments with qualitative observations will provide more comprehensive evaluations. Longitudinal studies are recommended to assess the long-term effects of cooperative learning on social and academic outcomes. Additionally, research focusing on strategies to support less socially active children within cooperative frameworks will help tailor interventions to diverse learner needs.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study at Permata Hati Kindergarten demonstrate that the cooperative learning model is an effective instructional approach for early childhood education. By organizing students into diverse groups based on ability, culture, ethnicity, and gender, this model fosters collaboration and mutual support, emphasizing group success over individual achievement. Cooperative learning not only improves academic outcomes but also enhances critical social skills such as communication, cooperation, empathy, and respect for diversity. The structured process, involving clear phases from motivation to evaluation and reward, ensures active participation and accountability among students. Teachers play a pivotal role in facilitating communication skills and managing group dynamics to maximize learning. Despite some challenges, such as accommodating shy or introverted children and maintaining classroom management, cooperative learning effectively engages young learners and supports holistic development. To further optimize the benefits of this model, the integration of instructional aids and project-based curricula is recommended. Overall, cooperative learning at Permata Hati Kindergarten proves to be a valuable strategy to nurture both cognitive and social-emotional competencies in early childhood.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

CA conceived the idea. CS and AI conducted data collection. MJ contributed to the literature review. FDH contributed to proofreading and drafting the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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