

Enhancing social skills through cooperative learning

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Abstract

The National Curriculum Statement of South Africa envisages qualified and competent teachers to deal with the diversity of learners and their needs in the classroom. One of the needs refers to all learners (Gr R-12) who need to acquire the necessary social skills to enable them to work effectively with others as members of a team, group, organization and community. These skills refer *inter alia* to: learning to work with others, listening to others, giving attention, asking clarifying questions, learning how to evaluate, and to praise others, handling conflict, reflecting on group work and allowing all group members to participate.

The most obvious place to deal purposefully with the development of social skills is the classroom. This implies that alternative ways and methods of teaching must be introduced to develop the necessary social skills. This article reports on the findings obtained from a combined quantitative and qualitative study that set out to determine the levels of social competence achieved by a group of Grade 2 learners, and the possible association of a cooperative teaching and learning intervention programme for enhancing the social skills of these learners. The results revealed the latent potential of cooperative learning to enhance the social skills of Grade 2 learners.

The significance of this research lies in the contribution it makes to establish the social competence of a group of Grade 2 learners and to determine the possibilities for enhancing their social skills through cooperative learning.

Keywords: Foundation Phase learners, social development, development of social skills, cooperative learning, cooperation, assertion, empathy, self-control

Introduction

The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) of South Africa builds on the vision and mission of the Constitution of the Republic of South

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Africa 1996, Act no. 108 of 1966, which provides the basis for curriculum transformation and development in contemporary South Africa (Department of Education, 2002:11). This vision and mission includes, among others, the following principle: "Social justice, a healthy environment, human rights and inclusivity." (Department of Education, 2002:10). Specifically with regard to this principle it is clear that the social needs of the learners need to be addressed during teaching and learning. The Critical Outcomes of the NCS envisage learners who are able to "work effectively with others as members of a team, group, organisation and community" (Department of Education, 2002, :11). In addition to this, the Developmental Outcomes of the NCS (Department of Education, 2002:11) envisage learners who are also able to "be culturally and aesthetically sensitive across a range of social contexts". In essence, education should stimulate the minds of young people so that they will be able to participate fully in economic and social life one day (Department of Education, 2002:12).

Although evidence of the importance of starting the development and assessment of social skills in the pre-school years for laying the foundation for later attitudes, values and behaviours is highlighted by Devin and Van Staden (2004:47) and Essa (1992:421), we could not find any evidence of research or formal assessment conducted with learners in South Africa. Furthermore, our own observations of various learning situations in the Foundation Phase revealed that most of the learners do not possess adequate levels of social competency which led us to the conclusion that intentional efforts should be undertaken to establish the social competence of young learners and to recommend ways in which social skills could be enhanced. In this regard, we support the assertion of Schniedewind and Davidson (1987) who state that: "We are not born knowing instinctively how to interact effectively with others." It is imperative that social skills must be taught through intentional efforts (Lerner & Kline, 2006:539; Greeff, 2005:1890193).

Research done by Roger and David Johnson (1987), Slavin (1987:7-13) and Joubert, Bester and Meyer (2006:4) show that cooperative learning seems to be an effective approach which is important for the school as well as for the community. Cooperative learning has the latent potential to improve the academic, social, affective and cognitive development of learners (Gawe, 2007:209, 213, 224; Gunter, Estes & Schwab, 2003:257-258; Webb, Farivar, Sydney & Mastergeorge, 2001). Other benefits include improved self-esteem, cooperation between learners of different cultures, tolerance, greater use of higher-level thinking skills and increased appreciation for different points of view (Joubert, Bester & Meyer, 2006:4; Post, 2001). We could not find evidence of the potential of cooperative learning for improving the social development of Foundation Phase learners in South Africa. Therefore our research builds on the fundamental work done by Johnson and Johnson and Slavin to determine the merits of cooperative learning for enhancing the social skills of Grade 2 learners.

The social development of Foundation Phase learners

Social development: concept elucidation

Social development refers to a process which, when successful, results in the human organism's moving from its infant state of helpless, but total egocentricity, to its ideal adult state of sensible conformity coupled with independent creativity (Child Development Institute, 2008).

According to Joubert *et al.* (2006), Dowling (2005:32, 109), Denham, Von Salish, Olthof, Kochanoff and Caverly (2004:321) as well as Mc Naughton and Williams (2004:118) socially acceptable behaviour refers to aspects such as how to lead and to follow, how to control temper, how to argue, how to be less selfish and self-centred and how to respect and show consideration for others. Literature also reports that interaction and cooperation with others, self-awareness, self-acceptance, responsibility, friendship and empathy with others in order to establish relationships, handling conflict, gender equality, race and cultural equality and listening to others are crucial skills that learners need to acquire (Devin & Van Staden, 2004:47; Landsberg, Krüger & Nel, 2005:102).

Early development and assessment of social skills with young learners is important in order to avoid poor mental health, dropping out of school, poor achievement, behavioural difficulties, delinquency, inattentiveness, peer rejection, emotional difficulties, bullying, difficulty in making friends, aggressiveness, problems in interpersonal relationships, poor self-concept, academic failures, concentration difficulties, isolation from peers and depression, and to lay the foundation for the later development of attitudes, values and behaviours (McClellan & Katz, 2006; Christopherson, 2003).

In the context of the article, we focused on enhancing the social skills as indicated by the data collection instrument which we used, namely **cooperation** (learning to work with others, giving attention, allowing all members to participate, sharing apparatus), **assertion** (listening to others, asking clarifying questions, learning how to evaluate, praising others, reflecting on group work, thinking and reasoning), **empathy** (feeling sorry for a friend in need, listening to friends, making friends), **self-control** (handling conflicts, controlling temper, asking for help when in need, having respect for others and their belongings, handling race, gender and cultural differences) (Gresham & Elliot, 1990:3). A close examination and comparison of these skills with those mentioned in Table 1 indicate that they build on the attributes defined for general social competence in the pre-school years.

Literature indicates that a number of factors can impact on the social development of learners. For the purpose of the article, we highlight the factors that could possibly have impacted on the present and future development of social competence of the learners who took part in

this research.

Factors that impact on social competence

According to Dilg (2003:182), the culture of home and school needs to be contiguous in order for social development to be fostered. Specifically in multicultural settings, many factors impact on learners feeling part of one cohesive group. As the group of learners involved in the research represented multicultural groupings, it was necessary to reflect on the relationship between social development and culture. In this regard it is necessary to mention that the NCS values multicultural education. Multicultural education is about changing the nature of teaching and learning in order to create a suitable learning environment for learners from diverse cultural backgrounds (Lemmer, Meier & Van Wyk, 2006:3). In a South African classroom this implies that teachers should maintain equally positive expectations of all learners irrespective of race, social class, gender or culture (Lemmer *et al.*, 2006:3).

In addition to this, the way parents act towards their children and the demands that they set are influenced by culture and can have a lasting influence on children's social development (Nisbett, Peng, Choi & Norenzayan, 2001:293). Children of authoritarian parents appear to be unfriendly, distrustful and withdrawn; children of permissive parents appear to be immature, dependent and unhappy and children raised by democratic parents seem to be friendly, self-confident and socially responsible. Most western cultures raise their children to be independent, to think for themselves and sometimes even question their parents' behaviour. Some Asiatic and African cultures expect obedience, conformity and cooperation - thus an authoritarian style (Nisbett *et al.*, 2001:293).

Learners' preferred learning styles are however not necessarily related to their cultural background (Lemmer *et al.* 2006:69). An awareness of the diversity of teaching strategies could therefore be considered during teaching. It is based on this notion that we argued that the cooperative teaching and learning intervention programme that was developed to improve the social skills of the Foundation Phase learners should not be regarded as a teaching method exclusively for learners from specific cultures.

In the context of this research, we thus acknowledge that the multicultural group of learners who took part in the research could vary in social behaviour related to *inter alia* the family backgrounds, parenting styles and the different cultures that they come from. The National Curriculum Statement however, expects of all learners (Grades R-12) to reach an adequate level of social development irrespective of culture, poverty, race, gender and disability (Lemmer *et al.*, 2006:96).

Bearing in mind that learners spend most of their time at school, it seems reasonable to assume that teachers can play a major role in

assisting learners to become socially competent. This implies that the teacher needs to consider the type of classroom environment that has to be created in order to promote social development.

Enhancing social skills through cooperative learning

Research done in the field of social development indicates that the acquisition of social skills requires social involvement. The role of parents, peers and teachers is crucial in this regard (Mahn, 2006:129; McClellan & Katz, 2006; Vygotsky in Dowling, 2005:33; Devin & Van Staden, 2004:47; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002:147-151; Chaiklin, 2003:54; Van Wyk, 2003:141). According to Pintrich and Schunk (2002:147-151) and Gresham and Elliot (1990:75), social skills training is generally characterized by the mediation and modelling of social skills by peers and/or adults to learners during problem-solving and peer group activities.

Based on this notion we concluded that cooperative learning (a teaching and learning strategy where learners work together in small heterogeneous groups on well structured tasks to achieve a common goal) could be an effective method for enhancing the social skills of the learners who took part in the study, as it complies with all the above-mentioned elements, namely modelling of behaviour, teacher and peer guidance and support and learning by doing (Slavin, 1990:1-3).

Another important aspect we had to take cognizance of was to examine ways in which to determine whether social skills develop or not.

Assessing the development of social skills

According to Lerner and Kline (2006:535) young learners overestimate their own social competence, misbehaviour and intimidating intents towards others. Therefore, La Greca, Lemanek, Loeber, Green and Lahey, as quoted by Webster-Stratton and Lindsay (1999), mention that mothers are the best candidates to rate their own children's social skills. Lerner and Kline (2006:535) and Webster-Stratton and Lindsay (1999) however, maintain that teachers are the best candidates to determine the level of the learners' social skills as learners spend most of their time at school. In support of the latter argument, we made final conclusions for this research based on the responses of the teacher.

Method

Empirical research

Research method: Quantitative research (questionnaires and

observations) and qualitative research (interviews) were used in this research. According to McMillan and Schumacher (1997:27,28; 2006:28), many situations are best investigated using a variety of methods and an important advantage of mixed-method studies is that they can show the results (quantitative) and explain why they were obtained (qualitative). This research supports the principle of triangulation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:105) as it enhances the validity of this study.

Research design

Intervention research with a pre-experimental design was used and data was gathered through a one-group pre-test, post-test design. The pre-test was done with the sample of Grade 2 learners to establish levels of social competence, after which the cooperative teaching and learning intervention programme was introduced for a period of twelve weeks. The same sample group was then subjected to the post-test to determine whether any association between the intervention programme and the development of social skills could be determined (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:224). This article reports on the early development and pilot testing of the cooperative teaching and learning intervention programme.

Implementation of a cooperative teaching and learning intervention programme

By meticulously following the steps for successful cooperative learning activities (Table 3), as identified by Johnson and Johnson (1984:26-40), the programme was designed and implemented. The social skills were introduced by implementing various cooperative teaching and learning methods and activities suitable for the Foundation Phase. Before the actual implementation started, eight heterogeneous cooperative learning groups of four members each were identified and the method was introduced to the learners. Each group had to decide on a name for the group and designed a banner and a slogan for the group. They also decided on basic rules that would guide their working together. This was done in order to create a feeling of belonging to and responsibility towards the other group members. The same learners were kept in basis groups with stable membership for the period of twelve weeks. This was done in order to give learners the opportunity to get to know one another and to sustain the working together relationships.

Twelve different activities were designed and implemented over 12 weeks lasting approximately two hours on Fridays through the rotation of various cooperative teaching methods (Learning Together, Group Investigation Jigsaw). Each activity focussed on achieving academic learning outcomes as well as social outcomes. The academic learning outcomes were derived from the National Curriculum Statement and the social outcomes linked with the indicated outcomes in the test

instrument. Activities included the following: conducting interviews, theme discussions, problem-solving, a puppet-show with the writing of an own script, reasoning, designing of a game, classification, word building and analysing information. To ensure that the activities were implemented strictly according to the criteria for the successful implementation of cooperative learning, we designed a checklist in accordance with the literature to guide us during the implementation (Johnson & Johnson in Grosser, 2002:31). This increased the reliability of the implementation of our programme and enabled us to conclude convincingly whether an association between cooperative learning and the development of social skills exists.

Table 1: Evaluation checklist for implementing cooperative learning

Criteria for the successful implementation of cooperative learning	Yes	No
Learning outcomes and social outcomes specified		
Balancing individual work and group work		
Criteria for assessment specified (formal and informal)		
Time frames set		
Heterogeneous groups determined		
Conducive group sizes determined (4 members per group)		
Roles assigned and explained to learners (academic and social roles)		
Task explained		
Resource material provided		
Structured tasks : Equal division of work		
Monitor problems, assist, guide and observe the application of social skills		
Assessing task-related and social skills		
Report back scheduled in groups		
Report back scheduled in class		
Conclusions and summaries given		
Constructive feedback given		
Time for reflection on group work		
Learners allowed to assess group work		
Rewards provided for group success		

The above checklist also served the purpose of guiding the chronological flow of each of the activities. During the rest of the week the class teacher was requested to determine whether the activities done on Fridays translated into the social behaviour of the learners.

Population and sample

The research was conducted in the D8 (Sedibeng West) district of the Gauteng Department of Education in South Africa and involved a multicultural group of Foundation Phase Learners at a Primary School. This school was chosen as the researchers are familiar with the school and staff, and it was easily accessible. The purposively selected sample comprised the following participants: Grade 2 learners (boys and girls) (n=32). Not all the learners were English mother tongue speakers, but it was their third year in the same school

environment, as most of them started school there in their reception year where the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) is English. Grade 2 learners were chosen for the research as these learners are halfway through the Foundation Phase and should have at least achieved a pre-school level of social competence on which teachers can build further.

Measuring instruments:

SSRS (Social Skills Rating System) questionnaires

As no South African test could be located to determine the social competence of South African learners, it was decided to use the SSRS which is an American test.

The SSRS components include three rating forms, namely for the teacher, the parent and the learner, which focus on the social skills domain. All three raters assess common core behaviours from the sub-domains **cooperation, assertion and self-control**. In addition to this, the parents also assessed **responsibility** and the learners assessed **empathy**.

After having obtained permission and consent from all participants involved in the research, we administered the SSRS questionnaires to the learners personally to determine to what extent they possess adequate social competence. The learners completed the questionnaire in the form of a pre-test and post-test at school under our supervision.

One teacher, who taught the learners for nearly eight months before the research and continued teaching them after the research was conducted, took part in the research. The teacher completed the social skills rating questionnaire for the learners in her own time prior to the intervention programme, as well as after the implementation of the intervention programme.

The parents were responsible for completing a social skills rating questionnaire for their child prior to the research to determine their perceptions on the status of the social development of the child, as well as after the completion of the research to determine whether they could detect any change in the social behaviour of their child. The questionnaires were sent home to be completed by one of the learners' parents and the class teacher collected the completed questionnaires for us.

Semi-structured interview

After the completion of the intervention programme, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the teacher of the learners to determine whether she noticed any improvement in the development of the social skills of the learners.

Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews were conducted with the learners who took part in the research after the completion of the intervention programme to determine their perceptions regarding the benefits of the programme with regard to the development of social skills. Focus group interviews were conducted with each of the eight cooperative learning groups.

Observations

Pre-determined criteria were developed in accordance with the literature, according to which we observed the development of the learners' social skills during the implementation of the intervention programme. We conducted observations of the various group members during each of the intervention sessions according to the following criteria: ability to interact and cooperate with others, ability to listen to others, ability to wait and take turns, ability to not interrupt each other, ability to show respect and appreciation for the opinions of others, ability to plan their own thoughts, ability to take part in joint decision-making and complimenting each other. These abilities were rated on a four-point scale as being "excellent", "good", "average" and "can improve".

Validity and reliability of the data collection instruments

Before the SSRS questionnaire was administered to the sample, we selected a number of participants from the target population who were not part of the sample to verify the questionnaire regarding its qualities of measurement and appropriateness and to review it for clarity. No signs of learners being uncomfortable or shy to answer the questions were detected and no questions were asked by the learners. It appeared as if the group did not experience any difficulties in understanding what the questions requested them to do and we decided to administer the questionnaire to the sample. During the actual study the group was also eager to complete the questionnaire and did not appear hesitant, uncomfortable or shy.

According to the discretion of the authors of the questionnaire, the instrument complies with reliability and validity criteria (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). Internal consistency, coefficient alpha reliability for social skills estimates ranged from .83 to .94. Validity was arrived at by considering content validity, criterion validity and construct validity. Content validity is supported by the fact that all test items represent the domain of social skills. Criterion validity is supported by the correlation between the SSRS and other instruments such as the Beck Youth Inventories of Emotional and Social Impairment (Beck, Beck, & Jolly, 2001). Both instruments prove a similar understanding of the domain social skills. Construct validity is underpinned by the fact that the SSRS measures social skills as a

sample of a behavioural function in specific situations and settings. Although it is an American test, we were convinced that the SSRS comprehensively samples the domain of social skills necessary for social competence, irrespective of culture and family background. However, in the absence of a local norm group, caution was exercised when the data obtained from the questionnaires were interpreted.

The questions formulated for the semi-structured interview and the focus group interviews were circulated to other Grade 2 teachers and learners who were not part of the sample to determine their appropriateness and to review their clarity before the interviews were conducted.

The criteria identified for the observations were verified against the literature and with knowledgeable colleagues in the field to determine whether the observations would provide a true reflection of the application of the social skills which we set out to establish.

Data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis and interpretation of the SSRS pre-test and post-test results

Data analysis was done through standardized procedures by the Statistical Consultation Services of the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus in South Africa. Data analysis was done by means of descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequencies, means and percentages were calculated for the various responses obtained for the pre- tests and post-tests from all three raters for the group of learners. Data obtained for the pre- and post-tests were compared and possible significant differences between the means of the pre- and post-test results were determined by means of t-tests.

All 32 participants were present when administered the questionnaire. Biographical information indicated that the average age of the participants was eight years. Learners, parents and the teacher were requested to respond to questions which determine the frequency of the execution of social skills before the research commenced. Responses pertaining to the frequency with which the skill was executed were rated “never” (0), “sometimes” (1), or “very often” (2). The following table provides the results for the questions put to **learners** to determine the frequency of executing the indicated social skills for the group.

Table 2: Learner perceptions of social skills

The learners rated themselves very high in the acquisition of cooperation and empathy with 84% and 85% respectively. Although the ratings for assertion and self control were relatively lower, at 70%

SOCIAL SKILLS			
Item number	Cooperation	Pre-test	Post-test
	Test total	20	20
	Group mean	16,8	14,3
	%	84	72
6	I tell others when I am upset with them.		
8	I keep my desk clean and neat.		
10	I do my homework on time.		
15	I listen to adults when they are talking to me.		
18	I avoid doing things with others that may get me in trouble with adults.		
21	I listen to the teacher when a lesson is being taught.		
22	I finish classroom work on time.		
25	I follow the teacher's directions.		
30	I use my free time in a good way.		
32	I use a nice tone of voice in classroom discussions.		
Assertion			
		Pre-test	Post-test
	Test total	20	20
	Group mean	14,0	13,9
	%	70	70
1	I make friends easily.		
4	I ignore classmates who are clowning around in class.		
9	I am active in school activities such as sports or clubs.		
10	I do my homework on time.		
16	I show that I like compliments or praise from friends.		
22	I finish classroom work on time.		
23	I start talks with class members.		
28	I ignore other children when they tease me or call me names.		
31	I ask classmates to join in an activity or game.		
33	I ask adults for help when other children try to hit me or push me around.		
Empathy			
		Pre-test	Post-test
	Test total	20	20
	Group mean	17,0	14,7
	%	85	74
2	I smile, wave, nod at others.		
3	I ask before using other people's things.		
5	I feel sorry for others when bad things happen to them.		
14	I let friends know I like them by telling or showing them.		
15	I listen to adults when they are talking to me.		
17	I listen to my friends when they talk about problems they are having.		
20	I say nice things to others when they have done something well.		
24	I tell adults when they have done something for me that I like.		
26	I try to understand how my friends feel when they are angry, upset or sad.		
29	I accept people who are different.		
Self-control			
		Pre-test	Post-test
	Test total	20	20
	Group mean	14,5	11,6
	%	73	58

7	I disagree with adults without fighting or arguing.
11	I tell new people my name without being asked to tell it.
12	I control my temper when people are angry with me.
13	I politely question rules that may be unfair.
19	I end fights with my parents calmly.
27	I ask friends for help with my problems.
28	I ignore other children when they tease me or call me names.
33	I ask adults for help when other children try to hit me or push me around.
34	I talk things over with classmates when there is a problem or an argument.

and 73 % respectively, it appeared as if the learners achieved adequate social growth during their pre-school and Grade 1 school years. The post-test, however, yielded opposite results. For three of the skills, lower results were reported with 72% for cooperation, 74% for empathy and 58% for self-control, whereas the rating for assertion remained the same for the pre- and post-tests at 70%. It appears as if the intervention programme made learners aware of what the skills really entail and that more could be done to enhance the social skills of the learners. Specifically with regard to self-control, it appears as if intentional efforts are needed to advance the development of this skill.

The following table presents the results for the questions put to the **parents** to determine the frequency of the execution of the social skills for the group of learners. Responses pertaining to the frequency with which the skill was executed were rated “never” (0), “sometimes” (1), or “very often” (2).

Table 3: Parent perceptions of social skills

The parents rated the social skills development of the group of learners much lower than what the learners did, with 60% for cooperation,

SOCIAL SKILLS			
Item number	Cooperation	Pre-test	
		Pre-test	Post-test
	Test total	20	20
	Group mean	11,9	11,9
	%	60	60
1	Uses free time at home in an acceptable way.		
2	Keeps room clean and neat without being reminded.		
11	Congratulates family members on accomplishments.		
15	Puts away toys or other household property.		
16	Volunteers to help family members with tasks.		
19	Helps you with household tasks without being asked.		
21	Attempts household tasks before asking for your help.		
27	Gives compliments to friends or other children in the family.		
28	Completes household tasks within a reasonable time.		

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33	Uses time appropriately while waiting for your help with homework or some other task.		
	Assertion		
		Pre-test	Post-test
	Test total	20	20
	Group mean	16,2	15,1
	%	81	76
4	Joins group activities without being told to.		
10	Invites others to your home.		
12	Makes friends easily.		
13	Shows interest in a variety of things.		
23	Is liked by others.		
24	Starts conversations rather than waiting for others to start first.		
30	Is self-confident in social situations such as parties or group outings.		
34	Accepts friends' ideas for playing.		
35	Easily changes from one activity to another.		
38	Reports accidents to appropriate persons.		
	Responsibility		
		Pre-test	Post-test
	Test total	20	20
	Group mean	13,2	13,3
	%	66	67
5	Introduces herself or himself to new people without being told.		
7	Asks sales clerks for information or assistance.		
8	Attends to speakers at meetings such as in church or youth groups.		
9	Politely refuses unreasonable requests from others.		
18	Answers the phone appropriately.		
20	Appropriately questions household rules that may be unfair.		
29	Asks permission before using another family member's property.		
31	Requests permission before leaving the house.		
37	Acknowledges compliments or praise from friends.		
38	Reports accidents to appropriate persons.		
	Self-control		
		Pre-test	Post-test
	Test total	20	20
	Group mean	12,0	11,1
	%	60	56
3	Speaks in an appropriate tone of voice at home.		
6	Responds appropriately when hit or pushed by other children.		
9	Politely refuses unreasonable requests from others.		
14	Avoids situations that are likely to result in trouble.		
17	Receives criticism well.		
22	Controls temper when arguing with other children.		
25	Ends disagreements with you calmly.		
26	Controls temper in conflict situations with you.		
32	Responds appropriately to teasing from friends or relatives of his or her own age.		
36	Cooperates with family members without being asked to do so.		

assertion, a higher rating was reported, namely 81%. The results for the post-test did not indicate any improvement either. For cooperation, the same rating was indicated as for the pre-test, namely 60%, whereas for assertion, responsibility and self-control respectively, lower ratings were indicated for the post-tests, namely 76%, 67% and 56%. It is interesting that, for both learner and parent

ratings, self-control yielded the lowest results on both test occasions. The lower ratings of the parents for cooperation, self-control and responsibility could point in the direction that adequate social growth had not yet been achieved by the learners.

The following table presents the results for the questions put to the **teacher** to determine the frequency of the execution of the social skills for the group of learners. Responses pertaining to the frequency with which the skill was executed were rated “never” (0), “sometimes” (1), or “very often” (2).

Table 4: Teacher perceptions of social skills

The teacher rated the social growth of the group of learners much lower than the learners and the parents during the pre- and post-test

SOCIAL SKILLS		
Item number	Cooperation	
	Pre-test	Post-test
	Test total	20
	Group mean	11,0
	%	55
8	Uses free time in an acceptable way.	
9	Finishes class assignments within time limits.	
15	Uses time appropriately while waiting for help.	
16	Produces correct school work.	
20	Follows your directions.	
21	Puts work materials or school property away.	
26	Ignores peer distractions when doing class work.	
27	Keeps desk clean and neat without being reminded.	
28	Attends to your instructions.	
29	Easily makes transition from one class activity to another.	
Assertion		
	Pre-test	Post-test
	Test total	20
	Group mean	8,5
	%	43
2	Introduces himself or herself to new people without being told.	
3	Appropriately questions rules that may be unfair.	
6	Says nice things about himself or herself when appropriate.	
7	Invites others to join in activities.	
10	Makes friends easily.	
14	Initiates conversations with peers.	
17	Appropriately tells you when he or she thinks you have treated him or her unfairly.	
19	Gives compliments to peers.	
23	Volunteers to help peers with classroom tasks.	
24	Joins ongoing activity or group without being told to do so.	

Self-control		
	Pre-test	Post-test
Test total	20	20
Group mean	8,5	10,2
%	43	52
1	Controls temper in conflict situations with peers.	
4	Compromises in conflict situations by changing own ideas to reach agreement.	
5	Responds appropriately to peer pressure.	
11	Respond appropriately to teasing by peers.	
12	Controls temper in conflict situations with adults.	
13	Receives criticism well.	
18	Accepts peers' ideas for group activities.	
22	Cooperates with peers without prompting.	
25	Responds appropriately when pushed or hit by other children.	
30	Gets along with people who are different.	

sessions with only 55% for cooperation, 43% for assertion and 43% for self-control. The post-test ratings of the teacher revealed higher scores for all three of the mentioned skills with 61% for cooperation, 52% for assertion and 52% for self-control. Although an improvement is indicated after the implementation of the intervention programme, the results could also indicate that the learners have not yet attained adequate social competence. During both test occasions, the teacher rated the social skills development of the learners on all skills lower than the parents and the learners themselves. Considering the responses of the teacher for the post-test, in which her responses indicated an improvement in the development of the learners' social skills, it appears as if the implementation of the cooperative teaching and learning programme could be associated with the development of the social skills of the learners who took part in the research. It is noteworthy that learners, parents and the teacher rated self control very low during the post-test.

Significance of the differences between the pre-test and post-test results

The significance of differences between the pre-test and post-test results is interpreted with caution due to the fact that this was only a pilot study and a true experimental design with an experimental and a control group was not used. In addition to this, we acknowledge that our conclusions can only be tentative. To determine whether the differences that occurred in some instances between the pre- and post- tests were significant, t-tests were utilized to determine the significance of the differences. The calculated p-values that were smaller than 0.05, were accepted as significant. The tables below reflect the results for the learners, parents and teacher respectively.

Table 5: Learners: comparison of pre-test and post-test results

	Cooperation		Assertion		Empathy		Self-control	
	Total	Ave %	Total	Ave %	Total	Ave %	Total	Ave%
Pre-test	20	16.80	20	14.20	20	16.80	20	14.53
Post-test	20	14.26	20	13.90	20	14.70	20	11.56
Difference	20	2.53	20	0.30	20	2.10	20	2.96
P-value	0.000046		0.65		0.000045		0.000113	

· Significant with regard to the pre-test

Cooperation: The calculated value for p is 0.000046. This value is smaller than 0.05 ($p < 0.05 = 0.000046$).

Assertion: The calculated value for p is 0.65. This value is larger than 0.05 ($p < 0.05 = 0.65$).

Empathy: The calculated value for p is 0.000045. This value is smaller than 0.05 ($p < 0.05 = 0.000045$).

Self control: The calculated value for p is 0.000013. This value is smaller than 0.05 ($p < 0.05 = 0.000013$).

The averages for the social sub-domains cooperation, assertion, empathy and self control as determined by the learners, were lower in the post-test. This could possibly be attributed to the fact that learners only became aware of what the different social skills imply during the implementation of the cooperative teaching and learning programme, and realised that they are not yet competent in the execution of the skills. According to the responses of the learners there is no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results and it appears as if cooperative learning cannot be associated with the enhancement of social skills. On the contrary, the post-test results are invariably lower than the pre-test results.

Table 6: Parents: comparison of pre-test and post-test results

	Cooperation		Assertion		Responsibility		Self-control	
	Total	Ave %	Total	Ave %	Total	Ave %	Total	Ave %
Pre-test	20	11.87	20	16.15	20	13.21	20	12.03
Post-test	20	11.90	20	15.37	20	13.28	20	11.09
Difference	20	-0.03	20	0.78	20	-0.06	20	0.93
p-value	0.95		0.06		0.88		0.11	

· Significant with regard to the post-test

Cooperation: The calculated value for p is 0.95. This value is larger than 0.05 ($p > 0.05 = 0.95$).

Assertion: The calculated value for p is 0.05. This value is larger

than 0.05 ($p > 0.05 = 0.06$).

Responsibility: The calculated value for p is 0.88. This value is larger than 0.05 ($p > 0.05 = 0.88$).

Self-control: The calculated value for p is 0.11. This value is smaller than 0.05 ($p > 0.05 = 0.11$).

Only with regard to self-control, a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test is evident. According to the parents, it appears as if one could assume that there is an association between cooperative learning and the enhancing of self-control.

Table 7: Teacher: comparison of pre-test and post-test results

	Cooperation		Assertion		Self-control	
	Total	Ave %	Total	Ave %	Total	Ave %
Pre-test	20	11.03	20	8.50	20	8.53
Post-test	20	12.21	20	10.34	20	10.31
Difference	20	-1.18	20	-1.84	20	-1.78
p-value	0.0035		0.000005		0.000017	

· Significant with regard to the post-test

Cooperation: The calculated value for p is 0.0035. This value is smaller than 0.05 ($p < 0.05 = 0.0035$). It can be accepted with reasonable certainty that the improvement in cooperation can be attributed to the implementation of the cooperative teaching and learning programme.

Assertion: The calculated value for p is 0.000005. This value is smaller than 0.05 ($p < 0.05 = 0.000005$). It can be accepted with reasonable certainty that the improvement in assertion can be attributed to the implementation of the cooperative teaching and learning programme.

Self control: The calculated value for p is 0.000017. This value is smaller than 0.05 ($p < 0.05 = 0.000017$). According to the teacher, it appears as if one can associate the improvement in self-control with the implementation of the cooperative teaching and learning programme.

A positive association of the cooperative teaching and learning programme for the enhancement of social skills is supported by the responses of the teacher.

The lower means indicated for the post-test responses of the teacher

compared to the means of the post-test responses for learners and parents respectively, could indicate that intentional efforts have to be made to enhance the social skills of the learners who took part in the study in order to provide a foundation on which future teachers can build.

Data analysis and interpretation for the semi-structured interview with the teacher

By means of a content analysis the interview responses of the teacher were scrutinized to identify themes. According to the teacher there was a noticeable improvement in the learners' execution of social skills. In this regard, she specifically refers to an improvement in their ability to cooperate and work together with their peers. Furthermore (although not reflecting one of the skills addressed during this research), she indicated an improvement in the listening skills of the learners when instructions were given to them. Although the teacher acknowledges the merits of cooperative learning for the development of cooperation, she indicates that more time, effort and attention are required to enhance the development of assertiveness, empathy and self-control.

Data analysis and interpretation for the focus group interviews with the learners

By means of a content analysis, the responses of the learners for the focus group interviews were also analysed in order to identify recurring themes. The learners indicated that they enjoyed the group activities as the roles that they had to play taught them responsibility. The group activities also taught them to listen to one another, to appreciate one another's opinions, respect others' belongings, assist one another when confronted with problems, make decisions together and take turns when sharing ideas and information. It appears as if the learners' responses during the interviews indicate improvement in cooperation, self-control, empathy and assertion which could be associated with the implementation of the intervention programme.

Data analysis and interpretation for the observations

The initial observations at the onset of the intervention programme indicated that the learners were not used to working in groups. Each learner wanted to do his/her own thing. They were not very good at listening to one another and kept on interrupting one another during the group activities. Impulsivity occurred frequently and it was very difficult for the learners to take part in joint decision making and planning for the execution of a task. As the intervention programme progressed with intentional to mediate and model the social skills to the learners during each activity, we observed an improvement in the way in which they cooperated with one another as a team. They

started praising one another for successes, and they listened to one another's opinions and formulated joint decisions.

Triangulation of data

In the absence of a true experimental design, we aimed to increase the validity and trustworthiness of the collected data by using a variety of data collection instruments. The apparent association of cooperative learning with the enhancement of the social skills of the group of learners who took part in the research is supported by the interview responses of the teacher, the focus group interviews with the learners and our observations during the implementation of the intervention programme. Although the research design only enables us to formulate tentative hypotheses, the results, although preliminary in nature, indicate the latent potential of cooperative learning for the enhancement of social skills.

Findings

It is not our intent to be prescriptive regarding correct social behavior, but rather to assist teachers to become aware of the importance of social skills development and to support learners intentionally as they grow. We are aware of the fact that no norms exist for South African learners and that the norms for American and South African learners might differ. However the results for the South African group of learners sound a warning for concern when bearing in mind that the SSRS comprehensively samples the domain of social skills necessary for social competence irrespective of culture (Gresham & Elliott, 1990:9). In the context of the NCS, it is argued that all learners need to become socially competent, irrespective of gender, culture, socio-economic environment. After the implementation of the intervention programme, slightly higher results were revealed for the learners who took part in the research.

Based on the significant differences between the pre-test and the post-test results for cooperation, assertion and self-control, we cautiously assume that there could be an association between cooperative learning and the enhancement of the social skills of the learners who took part in the research.

Limitations of the research

We acknowledge that the research in its present form presents a number of limitations due to the small sample size and nature of the research design which only allows for the formulation of tentative hypotheses and hampers the generalization of the findings. Furthermore, the enhanced social skills might be a temporary change to behaviour in response to a change in the classroom environmental conditions. Prolonged observation of the learners' social functioning

and purposeful efforts to enhance their social functioning over a period of time is necessary to determine whether the social attributes are typical or not for learners of this age and whether these attributes can be enhanced or not.

We also acknowledge that children vary in social behaviour for a variety of reasons. These reasons include *inter alia* the following: having distinct personalities and temperaments from birth, different family relationships and backgrounds, different cultural expectations and different degrees of maturation which could impact on the results of the research. However, apart from these limitations, the research provides some insight into the latent potential for enhancing the social skills of Foundation Phase learners with cooperative learning.

The present research was only a pilot study and further evaluation and development of the intervention programme are required to report conclusively on the merits of cooperative learning for improving social skills.

Recommendations and conclusion

It should not be accepted that social skills are automatically developed at home and that all children possess the necessary social skills when coming to school. Social skills should be taught. Therefore, parents and teachers need to play a vital role in the development of social skills by acting as role models who must display acceptable social behaviours. It is recommended that opportunities for interaction should be created: on the playground with other learners, in the classroom between learners and teacher through the use of cooperative learning and at home between other members of the family and friends. Social behaviours and moral values go hand in hand and should be discussed with learners. Learners should be equipped with different strategies for problem-solving and how to cope with failure. In order that learners experience the benefits of cooperative learning, teachers need to be informed of the advantages of cooperative learning for the development of social skills.

Teachers of the Foundation Phase learners are thus faced with the challenge to nurture the development of social skills. This will provide the necessary foundation on which teachers in the Intermediate and Senior Phase can build. If no intentional efforts are made to develop the social skills of learners, the Critical and Development Outcomes of the National Curriculum Statement might fall by the roadside.

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