

3.9.4 Equity-in-Cooperative-Learning-Groups

Brief description, and rules of the implementation of the learning activity

Cooperative-Learning-Groups is a complex active learning method based on high-level group work that creates equal opportunities, eliminates status differences within the group, and focuses on mutual respect. It combines the practices of Stanford University and the Hungarian Complex Instruction Program. It allows for the dismantling of status differences (knowledge, ability, and social hierarchies) within the classroom and the integration of disadvantaged or marginalized students.

Skill focus

- **Primary Skill Focus**
 - Valuing People and Nature
- **Complementary/Secondary Skill Focus**
 - Connectedness
 - Critical thinking
 - Empathy
 - Problem-solving
 - Creativity
 - Flexibility

Age group	Student number	Duration
6-10 years old students	Whole class in 3-4 small groups	25-30 minutes / activity

Proposed step by step implementation of the learning activity

The teacher transforms traditional individual lesson exercises into open-ended group exercises organized around a central theme of the lesson. The open-ended group exercise should be designed so that

- solving them require diverse knowledge, experience, and skills. (these diversity is what complexity means in this active learning technique).
- no single student can solve them alone, but everyone can contribute to the solution and success.
- because the task is open-ended, there is no one best correct solution.

The essence of carrying out the task is not about who is the best, but rather about cooperation based on the group's diversity.

Suggested step-by-step implementation of the learning activity:

1. **Planning and task design:** The teacher designs an open-ended task around a "big idea" (major topic of the actual lesson) that ensures mutual dependence within the group but also individual accountability.
2. **Group formation:** The teacher consciously creates heterogeneous groups of 4 (based on ability, background, and status).
3. **Role assignment:** Four roles are assigned within the group for the 6-10 age group: The „Little Teacher” (keeps the group on task), The „Materials Manager” (handles the materials), The „Harmonizer” (ensures everyone gets a chance to speak), and The „Spokesperson” (presents the work of the group).
4. **Introduction of "Multiple Abilities":** The teacher states the basic principle: "This is a complex task. No one is good at everything, but everyone is good at something. Today we need creative thinkers, skilled craftsmen, precise finisher and active listeners."
5. **Group work, Tasks Delegation and Empowerment:** The students work. The teacher steps back from directing, that is the Little Teacher’s role. The teacher observes status issues, group dynamics, and collaboration, and intervenes when necessary to “assign competence to a specific child” (e.g., by publicly praising a quiet student’s unique contribution or skill).
6. **Reporting:** The Spokespersons present the group's creative solutions to the class.
7. **Role rotation:** Next time, the roles change, allowing low-status students to become leaders and dominant ones to become supporters.

Rules in primary school:

- **Rule 1:** Tasks must be open-ended (multiple good solutions are possible) and require "multiple abilities" (e.g., reading, drawing, calculating, spatial awareness, organizing).
- **Rule 2:** Every member has a specific role in group work (Little Teacher, Materials Manager, Harmonizer, Spokesperson – in the case of students grade 4 more roles could be added) which changes with each new task (in the next lesson task, or next lesson) to ensure equal opportunities. Thus, roles are not permanent, and everyone will predictably act in every group role.
- **Rule 3:** The teacher delegates control to the groups.
- **Rule 4:** The activity must relate to a central theme of the given subject/lesson.

Indoor/Outdoor Classroom layout notes

This is essentially an indoor method, but of course it can also be used when the class takes place outdoors. In the case of classroom implementation, keep the following in mind:

- Desks must be arranged into "islands" of 4, ensuring students sit „face-to-face” and be able to make eye contact.
- Materials (papers, scissors, books) must be placed on a central table, from where only the Materials Managers can take them, reducing classroom chaos.

How does this learning activity develop this particular skill?

The Equity-in-Cooperative-Learning-Groups method was originally created specifically to handle hidden classroom dynamics, hierarchies, and social differences. Therefore, developing Connectedness and Valuing people is not just a "byproduct" of the activity, but the main pedagogical goal of the method.

Developing Valuing people:

The development of the Valuing people skill is based on that students recognizing and respecting the values inherent in others, understanding that diversity is an advantage, and being able to overcome prejudices and social/academic hierarchies. This is ensured by group work, open-endedness, and the diversity of required knowledge, experience, and skills (complexity):

- **Role rotation:** A ranking (status hierarchy) forms in every class. The ideas of good students or dominant, (noisy)students are automatically accepted, while the ideas of weaker or disadvantaged students are often ignored. The assigned and continuously rotated roles break this ranking. When the "passive/low status student" becomes the Little Teacher and the "good student's" task is to quietly provide materials (Materials Manager), children are forced to look at each other with respect from a new perspective. They learn to value the other person in a position they have never seen them in before.
- **The principle of "Diversity of Abilities":** The implementation of the tasks used by this method do not require the knowledge of only one thing (good at numbering), but rather demand spatial awareness, drawing skills, empathy, problem solving and critical thinking, organizational skills, manual dexterity. The teacher makes the group aware of this in advance: "No one is good at everything, but everyone is good at something." When the group gets stuck and the task is solved, for example, by a student with dyscalculia who has excellent spatial awareness or drawing skills, the other students learn to recognize and value the different kind of talent within that student.
- **Assigning Competence:** When the teacher notices that a "low status" or often marginalized student has a good idea, and praises this loudly and specifically in front of the group ("Notice how cleverly Laci grouped these data, this is a huge help for the task!"), it immediately changes the group's value judgment. The peers get the message that this student is valuable and smart. By doing this, students learn how to look for and value the positive in every single person, instead of focusing on their shortcomings.

Developing Connectedness:

The development of Connectedness with this method is based on students feeling part of a supportive community, experiencing a sense of belonging, and being able to build a network of trust with their peers.

- **Positive interdependence through open-ended tasks:** In traditional education, students work next to each other, but isolated (or competing with each other). In this method, tasks are complex so that they must be solved together. The successful joint completion of the task psychologically unites the group. They experience that they are "rowing in the same boat".

- Delegating control: The teacher consciously steps back, and students are forced to turn to each other for help. If the group gets stuck, the teacher does not solve the problem, but students do it together with their peers.
- Continuous dialogue and joint thinking within the group create deep, real connections. The more the group discusses and talks about the task, the stronger their cohesion and the learning experience.
- Rotation of standard roles: This guarantees that quieter or marginalized children cannot "hide," and dominant children cannot suppress them. When an anxious students' experiences that the group needs their work and their peers listen to them (because the method obliges them to), their attachment to the group and the class drastically increases.

In summary, the technique clearly develops primary the valuing people skill but also the connectedness. This active learning technique is not just about mastering the curriculum. Structured cooperation, the sharing of power (control), and the inclusion of multiple abilities force students to rely on each other and value each other.

What do we want to achieve regarding primary skill development (student understanding and/or behaviour)?

Understanding level: By using the technique regularly and consciously, students understand that:

- the group's success depends on the members' cooperation, not on the performance of a single "smart" student.
- a "good student" is not only one who reads fast or calculates flawlessly, but also highly valuable is the one who draws well, has excellent spatial awareness, is empathetic, or can calm others down.
- it is nature to make mistakes, and joint thinking overrides competition.
- class ranking does not determine a person's true value, and they become more open towards their non-dominant peers.

Behaviour level:

- students are curious and ask for the opinions of their quieter, or marginalized peers (e.g., "What do you think about this, Peter?").
- students voluntarily, loudly praise and acknowledge each other's specific contributions.
- when a low-status student acts as the "Leader", high-status (dominant) students accept their direction, consciously step back, and give them space without dominating the task.

Suggested use, and practical subject-related examples

The method can be applied in connection with any subject. The teacher's task is to transform individual lesson tasks related to the current topic of the lesson into open-ended group tasks in such a way that it requires not the knowledge of a single thing, but a diversity of knowledge and skills. We leave the application of this to the reader).

Materials and tools needed for implementation

- Open-ended task descriptions (where there is not only one best solution).
- Shared creative tools and crafting materials (large sheets of wrapping paper, coloured pencils, modelling clay, glue, etc.).
- Specific materials needed for the subject activities (e.g., printed math problems, short texts, experiment tools).

Guiding questions

- Little Teacher, how could you divide the work so that the others can also participate?
- Spokesperson, do you understand everything your group is doing right now? If you had to stand up now, could you explain it to the class?
- Did you pay attention so that everyone could share their proposal?
- I hear you have two very good, but completely different ideas. Harmonizer, what method do you suggest to the group for making a decision? Will you vote, or try to merge the two?
- Before you move on, could someone repeat exactly what their peer's proposal was? Are you sure you understood each other?
- What is our next step and who is doing it?
- Are we staying focused or getting distracted? What helps us follow through?

Tips and Tricks for dealing with challenges

- **Challenge:** A high-status, dominant student wants to do everything themselves.
Tip: Enforce the roles! Ask the Little Teacher why they allow one person to work or introduce the rule that only the Materials Manager can touch the tools until there is a joint decision.
- **Challenge:** A low-status student is passive, or the others ignore them.
Tip: Notice a good thought from the passive student and praise it loudly: "Look how uniquely Peter arranged the shapes. This is exactly the visual logic the group needs right now!"
- **Challenge:** Students finish too quickly, then get bored.
Tip: The task was probably not open-ended enough or requiring multiple abilities. Prepare deepening "challenge questions" for early finishers.
- **Challenge:** Students argue loudly and cannot agree.
Tip: The teacher should not solve the conflict! Support the "Harmonizer" with sentence: "How could we merge the two ideas?" or "Do you think it's time to vote?" Expect them to do their job.
- **Challenge:** Younger (6-7 years old) children forget their roles.
Tip: Use large, clear pictures on the role cards. Before starting work, stand up all the Little Teachers, then the Materials Managers, and have them state loudly what their job is that day.
- **Challenge:** The group gets lost in the details and runs out of time.
Tip: Use a large visual timer and make it the Little Teacher's (or Timekeeper's) job to track it. The teacher should not rush them, but ask a question forcing prioritization (e.g., "What is the single most important step right now so the Spokesperson can stand up?").

Difficulty level tailoring

Teachers can tailor the Equity-in-Cooperative-Learning-Groups to three difficulty levels to meet students' needs.

- **Beginner learners (6-7 years old):** Instead of text-centred tasks, focus on hands-on, physical, building, or drawing activities.
- **Advanced learners (8-9 years old):** Groups of 4+, all 4+ roles assigned. The tasks require more reading, interpretation, and multi-step problem solving. They can only ask the teacher for help if all 4 members have the exact same question.
- **Expert learners (9-10 years old):** Completely open-ended project tasks spanning multiple lessons. Students themselves must recognize and praise the special abilities of their peers during reflection. There can be larger groups of 6 with additional roles.

Debriefing and Reflection questions

- How did working together make the task easier or more fun compared to doing it alone?
- Can you share a moment when you felt you were a really strong, cohesive team?
- How were you able to move forward when the group disagreed on something?
- What was a surprising, smart thing that one of your teammates did today?
- We said today's task requires multiple abilities. Whose special ability helped the group the most today, and in what way?
- What did you learn today from your peers' work and opinions?
- What good or surprising idea did you learn today from a classmate that you wouldn't have thought of yourself?