



Cooperative Learning in PE Lessons for pupils with SEBD*

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PE and SEBD

The research literature combining PE and SEND generally has a focus on physical limitations and barriers to learning rather than social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), in which there are very few studies (Bailey, 2005; Vasileiadou, 2009; Medcalf et al, 2011). The nature of the environments in which SEBD pupils are educated means that the studies that have been conducted often involve low numbers of participants which provides additional issues in evaluating the literature.

Medcalf et al (2011) provide an overarching history of the research of the relationship between PE and SEBD, where this sits within a wider context, and attempt to fill the gap in the literature through a series of case studies. They acknowledge that PE has a distinctive role in the educational context lending itself to 'the opportunity for a holistic and developmental programme of activities', highlighting the potential that this has for the social needs of pupils.

Students with behavioural difficulties have lower social skills, cooperation and self esteem, and are less likely than pupils without behavioural difficulties, but equal levels of activity, to participate in organised sporting activities; opting for activities they can do on their own (Gendron et al, 2004).

There is a history of sport and exercise being used to 'treat' SEBD however these studies are often conducted outside of social groups and away from a classroom/learning environment so may have little relevance to the school setting (Medcalf et al, 2011). There is evidence that

participation in sport can reduce social exclusion and improve physical, academic and mental health with tentative claims about reducing criminal activity and truancy (Bailey, 2005).

Pupils with SEBD are shown to have a positive opinion of PE as they feel that it is time away from more 'academic' lessons (a common feature of all pupils regarding PE), and an environment where they feel they can achieve mastery. Pupils feel they are able to control their behaviours that may be seen more negatively in other lessons; that PE is an opportunity for autonomy and independence, and to experience success and competence (Medcalf et al, 2011).

Pupils also, however, report placing sporting abilities in high regard socially which can be threatening when ability is, or is seen to be, low. Medcalf et al (2011) and Bailey (2005) note that previous experiences play a big part in how pupils view their success and competence in PE. Indeed, they state the challenges pupils face when they are not competent, and the magnification of difficulties that occurs, often leads to increased negative behaviour.

The discussion around pupils with behavioural difficulties and PE centres around the need for teachers to be mindful of the individual pupils they are instructing and the methods they use to deliver the activities they offer.

*The term 'SEBD' is used in place of 'SEMH' as the latter is a relatively new term and is not referenced in the literature.

Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning has its roots in constructivist

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Sharan, S., (1980) 'Cooperative Learning in Small Groups: Recent Methods and Effects on Achievement, Attitudes, and Ethnic Relations'. *Review of Educational Research*, 50(2), pp.241-271

Torre, D.M., Van Der Vleuten, C. and Dolmans, (2016), 'Theoretical perspectives and applications of group learning in PBL' *Medical Teacher* 38 pp.189-195

Vasileiadou, M. (2009) 'Cooperative learning and its effects on pre-primary, marginalized children', *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 14(4), pp 337-347

methodologies which centre on the theory that social interaction precedes development. Child-centred views of learning give pupils responsibility for their own learning with teachers taking on the role of facilitator rather than instructor (Sharan, 1980; Dyson et al, 2004).

There is strong evidence that explicit, direct, approaches that teach skills using small steps and frequent checking for learning, are more effective than implicit, constructivist, methods, especially for novices and disadvantaged pupils (Rosenshine, 1986; Hattie, 2009), and that constructivist methods should be used to support explicit learning (Rowe, 2006).

On a classroom-level, criticisms of group learning include (Bennett, 2015):

Disguised inactivity – pupils coasting whilst others do the work

Unequal loading – pupils participating with different levels of effort

Inappropriate socialisation – playtime come early

Unfair assessment – assessment of a whole group rather than the individual

Clearly, whilst there will be occasions that are more classroom based, PE is a subject where instruction will often require pupils to work in groups. Is cooperative learning the best way to do this and will it be of benefit to pupils with SEBD?

There are multiple definitions of what cooperative learning involves (Dat-Tran, 2013), however, common throughout the literature is that cooperative learning requires the provision of a structured framework for teaching and these five elements must be present for cooperative learning in the classroom: positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal & social skills, and group processing (Johnson et al, 2007; Dat-Tran, 2013; Casey and Goodyear, 2015). Reported benefits of cooperative learning include increased self-esteem and trust (Johnson et al, 2007; Dyson et al, 2004), development of social skills (Dyson et al, 2004; Attle and Baker 2007; Vasileiadou, 2009), benefits to mental health and opportunities for leadership (Attle and Baker, 2007). Whilst the

majority of the research of cooperative learning is in the mainstream classroom or higher education, there are several studies with the specific focus of using cooperative learning for PE instruction.

Casey and Goodyear (2015) position cooperative learning as a model capable of supporting the four learning outcomes of physical education: physical, cognitive, social, and affective learning. In their review of the literature, they highlight areas in which research may be improved in order to clarify how a cooperative learning model can be used successfully in PE lessons. They found that within the four learning outcomes, physical, cognitive, and social learning were predominant, with further research needed for affective learning.

A 2017 book, 'Cooperative Learning in Physical Education and Physical Activity' (Dyson and Casey) reviewed by blogger ImSporticus (2017) provides educators with the methods and techniques necessary to use cooperative learning in schools. The book states five key elements as guidelines for successful implementation: Positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability, small group interpersonal skills, and group processing. These elements address some of the issues raised around group work such as assessment and participation in the task.

Following a trial within lessons, ImSporticus states that when used as a structure for lessons, the methods were successful, however when used in a more faithful way, although pupils were engaged and enjoyed the lesson, it was felt that pupils didn't learn as much as they would necessarily have done in a lesson without using cooperative learning. A cooperative learning model allowed ImSporticus to focus on individual learning needs but it is felt that the methods would require refinement to be used further. This of course is one review of the book and it is not possible to comment in more depth without reading the text.

The views of ImSporticus do align with some of the general concerns about group-work in the classroom; it is possible that these factors would be increased for pupils with SEBD. As Dat Tran (2013) points out, one of the five elements of

cooperative learning that must be present is that pupils need to be socially skilled for it to be effective. When allocating roles within groups it is also worth noting that SEBD pupils may have issues with hierarchy (Vasileiadou, 2009, Medcalf et al, 2011). It is important to provide a socially inclusive learning environment for pupil well-being (Idsoe, 2016) and cooperative learning has been shown to have a negative effect on competitive tasks (Johnson et al, 2007). Even if the task itself is not competitive, pupils with SEBD can find ability (or perceived ability) in PE as inherently competitive (Medcalf et al, 2011) which may have a negative impact on behaviour.

Alternatives to Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is one of many 'models-based' approaches to teaching PE. Metzler (2017) states that instruction should be based on many factors and as these change, methods of instruction should change. Metzler's models include direct instruction, personalised system for instruction, cooperative learning, sport education, peer teaching, inquiry teaching, tactical games, and teaching personal and social responsibility. Some of these models are very similar and it is for the teacher to identify which is most appropriate for a particular lesson.

Sharan (1980) compares several different instructional methods and sets out the differences between peer tuition methods and group-investigation methods of teaching. He suggests that methods that use group investigation (including cooperative learning) are better for higher cognitive functions, suggesting that they are not appropriate for novice learners which is supported by other evidence (Rosenshine, 1986, Attle and Baker, 2007; Hattie, 2009).

Peer education is reported by The Education Endowment Foundation as having a positive impact on the learning of all types of pupils with some evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds and low attaining pupils make the biggest gains. They identify methods with supportive frameworks as most successful and state that peer tutoring should not replace normal teaching or introduce new material, but supplement it and consolidate learning. Programmes of cross-age peer tutoring have

found that intensive blocks of tutoring are more effective, and there are benefits for both tutors and tutees across a range of age groups.

Cooperative Learning, PE and SEBD

There will be lessons where cooperative learning is an appropriate method for teaching PE to pupils with SEBD however consideration needs to be taken as to which lessons these are and whether there is a more suitable alternative.

Things to bear in mind when using cooperative learning:

- Use cooperative learning to consolidate learning that has already taken place rather than as an introduction of new material.
- Pupils need to be socially skilled for cooperative learning to be effective. Practice social skills in a non-threatening context.
- Ask if there is a better way to teach this particular topic - weigh up whether any extra workload for preparation is worth potential gains.
- Provide a framework.
- Plan groups and provide an opportunity for pupils to take different roles.
- Share information on grading and include individual accountability for outcomes. Provide individual and team rewards.
- Monitor the groups. Is one pupil doing all the work? Keep an eye out for off-task behaviours.
- Be aware that even if the task isn't competitive, pupils with SEBD may still find even perceived ability in PE as competitive.

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