

KINDNESS IN COLLABORATION

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a great amount of research on collaboration, collaborative learning and collaborative activities in which students essentially work in small groups. Collaborative activities, often organized as project work in schools, are used to develop 21st Century skills in students. Collaboration has been considered as a means to increase student acquisition of content knowledge and develop cognitive skills, like critical thinking and problem solving (Kuhn, 2015). This paper presents the impact of collaboration on developing attributes of kindness among students at middle school level. 152 students from middle school of Bunts Sangha's S M Shetty International School and Junior College, Mumbai, India participated in the survey. Data has been collected quantitatively and qualitatively through deploying a questionnaire to students. The findings of the study support the use of collaborative activities for developing kindness attributes in students. Such research will further strengthen our understanding of the development of kindness attributes through collaboration and will help educators to maximise the use of collaborative activities to develop kindness attributes in students.

Keywords: collaboration; collaborative learning; kindness; attribute



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Collaboration is coordinated, synchronous activity that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem. (Roschelle & Teasley, 1995)

Collaborative learning can be defined as the process of two or more students working together to solve the group task at hand (cf. Renkl, 2007). They can achieve this by sharing their knowledge and thus building common ground and joint knowledge (Roschelle, 1992).

"Collaborative learning is based on the idea that learning is a naturally social act in which the participants talk among themselves (Gerlach, 1994).

"Kindness is a combination of emotional, behavioural, and motivational components. (Kerr, O'Donovan, & Pepping, (2014, p. 20)

"Kind acts are behaviours that benefit other people, or make others happy. (Kerr, O'Donovan, & Pepping, (2014, p. 23)

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines attribute as “ a quality, character, or characteristic ascribed to someone or something”

INTRODUCTION

According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Learning Framework 2030, education must do more than just prepare students for the world of work. It must also equip them with the skills that will enable them to become responsible, active and engaged citizens of tomorrow. Through participation in collaborative learning activities, students have the opportunity to have peer conversations, present their views, defend their ideas and consider multiple perspectives. (Srinivas, H., 2011). Research has also shown that through asking students working in groups to identify behaviours that helped them to work together as a group and asking each individual to reflect on their own contribution to the success of the whole group, students become aware of how positive and helpful interactions benefit the group as a whole (Panitz; T., 1996; Cohen B.P. & Cohen, E.G., 1991). In recent years, more and more schools are using collaborative activities, often called project work, to build 21st century skills in students. (Scardamalia, 2001; Law, 2004).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has defined social and emotional learning (SEL) as “...the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions”

It is important that educators create conditions for developing skills like empathy, appreciation, gratitude, conflict resolution, respect, courtesy, tolerance and understanding through providing opportunities for students to participate in collaborative activities. A closer look at these skills tells us that these are also attributes of kindness. When students learn these skills and practise them regularly, they imbibe them and they are able to apply them in the larger community.

All schools use collaborative activities either by design or by default. Collaborative learning is assuming more and more importance in classrooms today. (Green & Green, 2010). In collaborative learning students work in groups or teams to complete a task, create a project. This entire process involves active engagement of students and is a definite and structured move from a teacher centred approach to a student centred approach.

An important 21st century learning skill, collaboration enhances students' knowledge and understanding while building critical thinking, problem solving, social and communication skills. Merriam-Webster, defines collaboration as follows: "To work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavour." Today's world has blurred spatial boundaries and collaboration is the buzzword. When students work in collaboration, they develop leadership skills and it boosts their self-esteem and makes them more confident people. At the same time they learn to think of the other members of their team, how to help them complete a task, how to improve upon ideas in a respectful manner. (Hong, Yu, & Chen, 2011) They learn to listen to someone else's idea and give credit when due. Through collaboration students develop skills that teach them to better their own self in a connected manner that develops someone else alongside.

Now more than ever our world is in need of kindness. While kindness can be taught to students through implementation of kindness programmes and by modelling kindness across school, I believe that kindness attributes are being instilled in students in a seamless manner when collaborative activities are an integral aspect of school life. Every act of collaboration has kindness attributes embedded in it. It will be difficult for true collaborators to adopt a completely clinical approach to get a task completed. There will be some degree of give and take, some hand holding, some acceptance, some conflict resolution. To some degree however small, kindness attributes will make their way into a collaborative activity.

The study will explore whether purposeful collaborative activities can act as an impetus to develop kindness attributes among students in middle school. We end with a discussion of the limitations of the existing study, and make recommendations for future research.

The Present Study

This study investigates the development of kindness attributes in middle school students through a collaborative activity.

Methods

The qualitative and quantitative research design of the study embedded a "Group Work Evaluation Questionnaire" with 12 statements of 3 Likert scale as "Always, Sometimes, Never" and open ended questions. 9 additional questions were used in the questionnaire. The data from 4 open ended questions was used to conduct content analysis.

Participants The participants of the study were 152 middle school students studying at the Checkpoint Level (Grades 6-8) from Bunts Sangha's S M Shetty International School and Junior College. The study took place after students participated in an exhibition "Knowledge Fiesta" on the theme Climate Action. 68 students were female and 84 were male from the age group 11-13 years.

Data collection instrument "Group Work Evaluation Questionnaire"(Erdem, A . (2009) was used for this study. 9 additional questions were added to the questionnaire to determine whether the collaborative activity helped in the development of kindness attributes among students. The findings of the questionnaire formed the basis of the qualitative analysis and the content of the open ended questions was used to conduct content analysis.

Procedure

School organised an exhibition titled Knowledge Fiesta on the theme 'Climate Action'. Groups of 5 were formed in each class in the Middle school. Each group was assigned a different topic centred around the theme . Teams were given ten days to work on their tasks. Each group presented their work during the exhibition. A 21 point questionnaire on collaboration was used for the study. "Group Work Evaluation Questionnaire" with 12 questions was used . 9 questions were also added and used in the questionnaire. The Questionnaire was administered to the students after the exhibition "Knowledge Fiesta" . Students were informed that this questionnaire was to gain feedback as they worked in their team. The results were analyzed using Microsoft Excel program.

Findings

The findings of the questionnaire are presented in a table followed by analysis of the open ended questions.

I. Questionnaire Statements

Five statements (1,2,6,7,10) out of 21 in the questionnaire are related to the way students work in groups, three statements (8,11,12) of the questionnaire are related to process of learning , four statements (3,4,5,9) are related to interactions within the group and nine statements (13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21) are directly related to kindness attributes exhibited by students in the group.

- a. The findings related to the way students work in groups show that students have enjoy working in groups and do so in a harmonious manner.

- b. The findings related to the process of learning show that students readily helped each other , while completing their own work on time. They also did not hesitate to ask the teacher for help when needed.
- c. The findings on group interactions showed that students are able to deal with group dynamics in an effective manner. The findings also show that while they are not completely open to interactions with people they do not know well, they were still ready to make the effort.
- d. The findings on kindness attributes exhibited by the students showed that students were less to tolerant about non-attendance for meetings. There was also a higher degree of reluctance to share their own ideas.

A. Statements related to the way students work in groups.

Table 1

Statement	Always	Sometimes	Never
We worked in harmony (1)	73 %	22%	5%
We decided as a group (2)	73%	25%	2%
We distributed tasks within the group (6)	75%	16%	9%
All group members performed assigned tasks (7)	-	100%	-
All members contributed when making decisions (10)	59%	36%	5%

The statement “All group members contributed while making decisions” had a lower score as compared to the other 4 criteria which was corroborated in the 4th open ended question “ What could be done to improve the outcomes of the next activity “ where 11 students said that there should be better participation in terms of sharing ideas and deciding

B. Statements related to process of learning

Table 2

Statement	Always	Sometimes	Never
We helped each other learn (8)	76%	21%	3%
We asked our teacher for help where necessary (11)	69%	26%	5%
We completed our tasks on time (12)	81%	18%	1%

The students helped each other to learn and ensured that the tasks were completed on time which had a direct impact on achievement of lower score in the criterion “ We asked our teacher for help where necessary”

C. Statements related to interactions among the group

Table 3

Statement	Always	Sometimes	Never
We found a chance to talk to and interact with our classmates we do not communicate with much except for this study (3)	59%	37%	4%
We warned our classmates who did not participate in group work properly (4)	66%	23%	11%
We listened to other group presentations quietly (5)	88%	8%	4%
We solved the problems that occurred among friends by talking and negotiating (9)	72%	23%	5%

The responses to the first statement “ We found a chance to talk to and interact with our classmates we do not communicate with much except for this study” had a lower score as compared to the other three criteria. In the second open ended question “What skills did you learn through this activity” only 7 students responded that they learnt to interact with someone they had not interacted with before which shows that this is an important aspect to be looked at when groups are being formed for collaborative tasks.

D. Statements related to kindness attributes

Table 4

Statement	Always	Sometimes	Never
We improved upon each other’s ideas (13)	79%	18%	3%
We applauded each other’s good ideas (14)	81%	16%	3%
We were respectful to one another (15)	87%	11%	2%
We helped a team member who could not complete a task (16)	72%	24%	4%
We ignored some else’s idea (17)	7%	13%	80%
We were hesitant to share our own ideas (18)	19%	37%	44%
We understood if someone turned up late or did not attend the meeting (19)	69%	30%	1%
We shared information with all team members (20)	88%	9%	3%
We did not let anyone feel left out (21)	75%	16%	9%

The statement “We understood if someone turned up late or did not attend the meeting” had the lowest score as compared to all the other statements. This was also reflected in students answers to Open Ended Question 4: “Is there anything that you or the group could do next time to improve the outcome of the activity?” where 13 students responded

that there should have been better attendance in meetings . 8 students responded that they needed to be more patient and cooperative.

II. Open ended Questions

The second part of the study covers the analysis of the open ended questions. Students were free to write their own answers to these questions .

The questions were:

1. What skills did you learn through this activity?
2. How did you help others in the group?
3. How did you feel being a part of this group?
4. Is there anything that you or the group could do next time to improve the outcome of the activity?

A. Responses to question 1 : What skills did you learn through this activity?

Table 5

Sr No	Response	Number of responses for 152 students (Some wrote more than one skill)
1	Teamwork	60
2	Skills related to the concept students were working on	41
3	Collaboration	28
4	Communication	14
5	Respect, patience, trust, responsibility, flexibility	11
6	Confidence	8
7	Share ideas	7
8	Interaction with someone they did not speak to before	7
9	Leadership	6
10	Time Management	4
11	Hard work	4
12	Presentation	4
13	Problem solving and creativity	3
14	Helping others	3
15	Did not learn any skill	4

B. Responses to question 2 : How did you help others in the group?

Table 6

Sr no	Response	Number of responses for 152 students (Some wrote more than one response)
1	Gave ideas	22
2	Solved queries	21
3	Found information to help the team	20
4	Appreciated and motivated others	13
5	Improved someone else's idea	11
6	Helped complete someone else's task	11
7	Listened to others opinions respectfully	8
8	Worked together	5
9	Reminded people to complete the task and not give up	5
10	Distributed work	3
11	Finished own tasks so that the team did not have to worry	3
12	I was all alone, everyone worked individually to complete the task	6

C. Responses to question 3 : How did you feel being a part of this group?

Table 7

Sr no	Response	Number of responses for 152 students (Some wrote more than one response)
1	I liked being a part of the group	115
2	Thankful to be a part of the group	11
3	Proud to be a part of the group	5
4	I has a sense of belonging and of family	5
6	It was chaotic but fun	1
7	I felt useful	1
8	I felt the same as before	6
9	I felt angry	1
10	I was not happy	1

D . Responses to question 4 : Is there anything that you or the group could do next time to improve the outcome of the activity?

Table 8

Sr No	Response	Number of responses for 152 students (Some wrote more than one response)
1	Better Time management	10
2	Better design, drawings, presentations, questions	13
3	We need to be more creative and upgrade our ideas	10
4	Better Coordination	13
5	Better attendance in meetings	13
6	Better participation in terms of sharing ideas and deciding	11
7	We need to be more patient and cooperative	8
8	We need to be more fair and give people a chance	2
9	Nothing	50

DISCUSSION

The study shows that students have a positive approach towards collaborative learning and highly value team work and collaboration. They are able to distribute tasks among themselves and complete the assigned tasks with less dependence on the teacher. However the responses show that all members do not contribute towards decisions. One factor could be that there were no grades assigned to the task . Another factor could be that students were hesitant to share ideas which was seen as a response from 56% of students in Table 4.

Student acted with responsibility in their respective groups and solved conflicts among themselves. They also made an effort to communicate with members they had not spoken to before and this was corroborated by their responses in the open ended question 1 where 7 students said that they learnt to interact with students they had not interacted with before. This is an important area to investigate in group formations where students must be encouraged to interact with members they are not familiar with.

This study highlights that in addition to developing skills of team work and collaboration, leadership, and communication, collaborative activities help students develop kindness attributes of respect, trust, responsibility, understanding, encouragement, patience, flexibility and appreciation.

95% of the respondents said that they were thankful, proud and happy to be a part of their group. 33% of the respondents said that their groups needed no improvement to achieve better outcomes the next time. However, there were very few responses of “I did not learn any new skill (4) I felt angry or unhappy being a part of this group (2) , I was all alone in this activity (6) . 50 students said that they did not learn any new skill. This needs to be investigated to understand what students expect in terms of learning a new skill.

Limitations of the Study

This study was carried out for a task that was conducted online. The interactions might differ when the same activity is conducted offline. The results should be interpreted in a careful manner in context of on campus activities. Moreover this was an activity where students were not graded for this task. The interactions might be different when students are assigned grades for their work. This study involved a co-curricular activity and the results may differ for a curricular activity.

Further scope of Research

This research was conducted in Middle School and there is scope for further research to investigate the role of collaborative activities in developing kindness attributes in primary and upper secondary students. A similar research can be conducted for a curricular activity where students are graded for their work.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that collaborative activities develop kindness attributes in students. Further testing is needed to determine whether the effect of kindness lasts or is seen only when students engage in collaborative activities. Such research will further our understanding of the development of kindness attributes through collaborative activities and will help educators to maximise the use of collaborative activities to develop kindness attributes in students.

In the world of today, kindness and collaboration are both needed in equal value and on a large scale. The progress of humanity is so dependent on connections and care and compassion. We must start in schools and provide students with opportunities to work shoulder to shoulder, creating magic not just for themselves but for others. Innovative, humane, collaborative activities will be the key to teach our students to become kinder, and more compassionate individuals who will make the world a better place.

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