

# Study on Class Teaching Equity in Cooperative Group Learning\*

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**Abstract**—Educational fairness is the consistent pursuit of human society and the realistic goal of China's educational development in the era of knowledge economy. Under the vigorous promotion of the new curriculum reform, the interaction between teachers and students is becoming more and more equal, students' subjectivity is gradually strengthened in class, and cooperative learning group is widely used as a form of optimized teaching organization with the development of education. However, because of inadequate guidance of teachers, unclear group division, individual development differences, and exam-oriented education system and so on, there are still some unfair problems in group building, teaching interaction, evaluation mechanism in the process of class teaching. These not only dampen the enthusiasm of students learning, but also go against the principle of education fair. To implement group cooperative learning scientifically reasonably and promote class teaching equity, it is needed to set up groups reasonably, improve the quality of teachers and grasp the connotation of educational equity, design a more fair and comprehensive evaluation system and attach importance to the construction of system guarantee mechanism.

**Keywords**—*cooperative group learning; class teaching; teaching equity*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In this era of knowledge economy, competitions around the ability and efficiency of creating, spreading and applying knowledge are more and more fierce, and this kind of competition is most directly embodied in education rights, education opportunities, education resources and education quality. The pursuit of a greater degree and higher levels of education fairness has become the common theme to the current world education reform. The outline of the national program for medium - and long-term education reform and development (2010-2020) also calls for promoting equity as a basic national education policy.

Educational equity is a basic value and criterion of education. It is connected with certain basic social systems,

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especially the educational system, and takes this as a benchmark to stipulate specific basic educational rights and obligations of social members, as well as the appropriate arrangement and reasonable distribution of educational resources and benefits among social groups and social members.

Teaching is the core link in the educational process, and also an important embodiment of educational fairness, which belongs to the category of educational process fairness. As the new curriculum reform promotes vigorously, exchanges by interaction between teacher and students has become more equal, students' subjectivity in the class has gradually strengthened, and cooperative group learning has been widely used as a kind of teaching organization form. Nevertheless, there are a variety of unfair problems in the process of class teaching's concrete practice, which dampen the enthusiasm of students learning and also go against the principle of educational fairness. In view of this, this paper will further discuss the reality and causes of unfair classroom teaching in cooperative group learning under the background of educational fairness research.

## II. THE REALITY OF UNFAIR CLASSROOM TEACHING IN COOPERATIVE GROUP LEARNING

With the increasing demand of educational objectives to highlight students' dominant position and optimize the teaching mode, the cooperative group learning mode comes into being. However, the unfair phenomenon of classroom teaching in group cooperation still exists widely, which is not only contrary to the fundamental requirements of educational fairness, but also far from the ideal value of cooperative group learning. From the specific implementation process of cooperative group learning, there are still the following problems in the practice process:

### A. Unfair Group Construction

As the basic unit of cooperative learning in class, the fairness and rationality of group construction directly affects the communication efficiency among students in the group, and further affects the performance and cooperation effect of students. At present, in terms of group construction, many teachers try to follow the principle of "inter-group heterogeneity and inter-group homogeneity" in cooperative learning groups, take various aspects' differences of students

into account, and arrange students with different grades in the same learning group.

Teachers assume that such groups can not only let students promote mutually, but also lay a foundation for fair competition among groups. In fact, teachers give too much consideration to the index of students' academic performance and lack of consideration of the communication, coordination and other abilities of the members in the group. As a result, the cooperative learning group cannot give every member an equal opportunity to present in the actual classroom practice, which destroys the original intention of "cooperation". All these lead to many problems in group cooperation: low level of trust among members, unequal opportunities for participation, poor communication, and nominal competition between groups and so on.

Complementary advantages and mutual promotion are demands of cooperative learning group, but they are not the inevitable results of group cooperative learning. We cannot simply hold the view that "as long as we take the form of group learning, students will naturally cooperate and promote mutually". If students are simply arranged to sit together and divided into groups, and then randomly assigned some learning tasks to discuss or complete, there won't have great cooperative learning effect, high-quality peer relationship and friendship. Moreover, it is difficult to improve and develop students' ability of communication and coordination and so on.

#### *B. Unfair Teaching Interaction*

Students are the main body of the classroom. There is also an unfair interaction between teachers and students, students and students in the process of class teaching.

In terms of teacher-student interaction, teachers or team members tend to assign or select students with excellent academic performance as the leader or presenter of this group. The students with lower grades usually obey or wait passively for the group leader to assign tasks, and hardly participate in the class presentation. In the long run, students who are good at learning have more opportunities to speak and are more recognized by teachers. They are becoming more and more confident and excellent. However, students with poor academic performance, because of being neglected and ignored, have weaker and weaker desire to participate in the group, and which widens the gap between them and excellent students.

In terms of the interaction between students and students, it also shows that students with excellent academic performance play a dominate role in the group. There is no lack of such phenomenon in group cooperative learning: A few students actively share their thoughts and ideas with other team members during group discussion, while other team members nod and agree with them. In the report session, the reporters are still these positive students who show the "group discussion results" on the stage. This kind of cooperative group learning is actually monopolized by a few students, while other members are "represented" and "thought". This obviously violates the original intention of mutual promotion and complementary advantage, and is not

compatible with the fair principle of "let every student enjoy equal educational opportunities".

#### *C. Unfair Evaluation Mechanism*

Teaching evaluation is an important part of teaching. The unfairness of teaching evaluation mechanism will undoubtedly affect teachers' teaching behavior and students' enthusiasm and initiative directly. Although cooperative group learning encourages cooperation, it does not mean that group performance is equal to individual performance, and evaluating from the perspective of group is the most reasonable.

Tan Wang, a Chinese scholar, once proposed to change the individual score to group score, and take the overall score of group as the basis for rewarding students, so as to achieve the effect of the group members making progress together. At present, most teachers also give the final result referring to the group performance, which forces students to think and cooperate with classmates to solve problems. However, in cooperative group learning, each student's ability, character, participation and contribution are obviously different. Hence, the individual evaluation of in cooperative learning group should focus on individual longitudinal comparison rather than group scores.

If the evaluation mechanism only starts from the whole group, it will affect the enthusiasm of some students. Those students who are hard-working and have excellent individual performance but have poor group performance cannot get positive feedback, thus losing the motivation of cooperation and reducing their enthusiasm and participation in cooperative learning. For another, some students will have the psychology of free-riding. Those students who make less contribution to the group can enjoy the same achievements and rewards as other group members who make efforts, encouraging their opportunistic or lazy behaviors. Such unfair and incomplete evaluation will dampen the enthusiasm and initiative of students to continue to participate in cooperative learning group and fail to play the function of "evaluation for development".

### III. CAUSE ANALYSIS OF CLASS TEACHING UNFAIRNESS

#### *A. Inadequate Teacher Guidance*

In the process of cooperative group learning, teachers should be collaborators, participants and promoters of learning activities. However, in the actual class teaching, the role of teachers is somewhat deviated, and the guidance of group cooperation is improper, which leads to teaching order disorder, unfair opportunities for students to participate, free-riding and other problems.

On the one hand, the teacher's guidance is out of position and teacher becomes a spectator of cooperative group learning. After assigning the study task, the teachers let students begin the cooperation study. The teachers do not patrol between groups to understand the progress of each group, nor do they participate in students' learning activities and point out students properly. Instead, they stand on the platform, either waiting or preparing for the following teaching content. If teachers fail to respond to students'

progress or defects in group cooperation timely, it will be difficult for students to change their behaviors through feedback, while if cooperation can get rewards and feedback, teenagers will be inclined to continue to cooperate. Teachers stay out and only pay attention to the external manifestation and results of cooperative learning, ignoring their own function in class teaching, which makes the effect of cooperation greatly reduced.

On the other hand, the teacher's guidance is offside and teacher becomes the arbitrator of cooperative group learning. The fundamental purpose of cooperative group learning is to cultivate students' ability of critical thinking, communication and coordination through independent thinking in class teaching and communication and cooperation among group members. In the actual class teaching, teachers use a set of reference answers and standard answers to evaluate the different conclusions of each group intentionally or unintentionally. Teachers interfere too much in the group learning process and do not leave students enough room on the specific details of cooperation. Therefore, in the practical cooperative learning activities, the center of class studying is still controlled by teachers, who guide students to the framework by pre-designed plans or procedures and ignore students' autonomy and subjectivity.

#### *B. Ambiguous Responsibility Division*

In addition to concentrated group discussions, there are scattered individual responsibilities. According to the theories about the factors of cooperative learning from Slavin and Johnson brothers, personal responsibility is very important, which determines the quality and level of cooperative learning content. If each student in the group has a clear division of labor and responsibility, and all members are responsible for their own duties, then the phenomenon of free-riding will be greatly reduced in the whole learning and discussion process, effectively avoiding some students taking the opportunity to chat, joke, desert or do their own things.

In cooperative group learning, each student's own learning and thinking is still very important. Cooperative group learning is independent thinking and collision among group members. It is the learning and absorption of others' opinions after independent thinking, and finally forms collective wisdom to solve problems. Therefore, if individual responsibility cannot be implemented in cooperation, students will lack initiative and enthusiasm in learning, which will not only affect the effect of the whole group's cooperative learning, but also easily lead to problems such as blindly following excellent students and unfair opportunities for class participation.

#### *C. Students' Development Differences*

The development level of students is influenced by genetic, family, school education, social environment and other factors. For teachers, there are no two identical students in class. Therefore, it is always a pair of contradictions in class teaching that how the unity of class teaching needs to be consistent with different individual needs. Educational equity is not equal to the absolute average of education process and conditions, but a relative balance. If the teacher adopts the teaching attitude of "equal treatment"

to whole class, it is actually a kind of unfairness. It is unfair for a teacher to look after either side in unified teaching class, which is a dilemma the teacher faced under current teaching mode framework.

#### *D. Exam-oriented Education Inertia*

Since the 1970s, in order to overcome the disadvantages of traditional education and improve the efficiency of class teaching, the United States has carried out a large number of cooperative learning theory research and incorporated cooperation as a teaching strategy into teaching system, setting off a worldwide upsurge of cooperative teaching. At present, China's quality-oriented education reform is also in full swing. Cooperative learning, independent learning and inquiry learning have become the three main learning methods advocated by the new curriculum reform. However, our education conception, system and evaluation standard of exam-oriented has been carried out for many years, which makes teachers pay more attention to students' academic performance rather than their comprehensive quality. And the treatment of students in class are in accordance with their grades, which concretely behaves that the students with outstanding academic performance enjoy preferential treatment in class, including the seating arrangement, group leader or the class cadre appointment, the number of class presentation, praise and compliments, etc. By contrast, students with medium or lower academic performance in the group are more or less ignored by teachers and on the edge of class teaching, which inevitably leads to the phenomenon of unequal opportunities in class teaching.

### IV. STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE CLASS TEACHING EQUITY

In view of various unfair phenomena in the process of class teaching like group formation, teaching interaction and evaluation mechanism, this paper further puts forward the idea of reasonable group formation, improvement of teachers' quality and optimization of evaluation system, so as to promote the fairness of class teaching.

#### *A. Setting up Groups Reasonably and Enhancing Complementation of Advantages*

A successful cooperative learning group is not necessarily a combination of the best students but a complementary group which can enable team members to give full play to their strengths. Therefore, in the establishment of cooperative learning groups, we should give full consideration to the individual ability and personality characteristics of each member, so as to exerts conformity advantage of "1+1>2".

Teachers should take effectively interaction between teachers and students as the starting point of a learning group, determine the scale of group, on the basis of "inter-group heterogeneity and inter-group homogeneity" principle, form students with differences in gender, personality, grades, communication and coordination ability into a cooperative learning group, therefore, the group can achieve complementary advantages in cooperative learning and better mobilize the enthusiasm to participate in. On the basis of cooperation, team members should have a clear division of labor: who are responsible for collecting task-based

information and summarizing it; who are responsible for simply recording the speech in the group; who are responsible for reporting the discussion in the group and so on. The division of labor among team members should be rotated at regular intervals, so that team members can have a better understanding of different roles and can better understand others and learn from each other.

At the same time, teachers should try to make the group members have equal opportunities to express themselves and increase the participation and enthusiasm of all students in cooperative learning. Each group can also design its own group name, group roles and so on, to enhance group cohesion and highlight the group's personality.

#### *B. Improving the Quality of Teachers and Enriching the Connotation of Education*

The teacher is one of the main bodies of the class and their teaching ideas will be expressed in the class teaching through teaching behavior. Without the careful design and guidance of teachers, cooperative group learning can only be a form, and class teaching fairness is out of the question. Therefore, the scientific implementation of cooperative group learning should unify teachers' understanding of cooperative group learning and educational equity.

Firstly, cooperative group learning mode is developed in response to the call of the times and the demand of quality education. It respects the subject status and initiative spirit of students, not only enables students to make progress in academic performance, but also pays attention to the comprehensive quality training like ability of cooperation, communication and coordination, promotes the overall development of students, and promotes the common progress of each member in the group, which is consistent with the connotation of education equity.

Secondly, teachers should insist on pursuing the equity of teaching process from micro level in the implementation of cooperative group learning. Teachers should have an overall design of the links and contents of cooperative group learning, and require students to prepare and think independently in advance, so as to make necessary preparations for class teaching. Teachers should go deep into the class in cooperative learning, find out the problems existing in group learning and correct the deviation in time. Teachers should try their best to ensure fair opportunities for each group member to participate in class teaching process. In the face of the different opinions from group members, teachers should teach students the skills of communication and cooperation, to cultivate students' team spirit and cooperation spirit. Finally, after all groups finish the communication and report, teachers should systematically link up what students have reported and summarize it as a whole, so as to consolidate the learning effect.

#### *C. Optimizing Evaluation System and Perfecting System Guarantee*

The development of cooperative group learning is not the icing on the cake of traditional class, but the innovation and improvement of teaching mode. This is a systematic project, which not only involves theoretical research and method

improvement, but also can be seen in the practical process of class teaching. Therefore, it is imperative to establish an effective system guarantee.

1) *Optimizing the evaluation system:* In cooperation group learning, teachers' evaluation mode may affect the effectiveness of group cooperation. If teachers tend to adopt result evaluation, students will pay too much attention to learning results such as grades, neglect the communication and cooperation with group members in the learning process, resulting in some of group members' free-riding phenomena, which is not conducive to the cultivation of students' cooperative consciousness and skills. If teachers tend to use process evaluation, students will lack of overall grasp of their own learning situation, lose the goal of learning and direction of efforts. If teachers put too much emphasis on individual evaluation, students will be too self-centered, and members will act independently and emphasize individual contributions to the group, thus losing the sense of cooperative learning. If teachers use too much collective evaluation, a part of outstanding students with excellent performance will lack of achievability and reduce the enthusiasm and initiative of cooperative learning. Therefore, in the communication and evaluation stage of cooperative group learning, teachers should grasp the selection of evaluation methods, follow the principle of combining group and individual, results and process, evaluate the achievement of goals in group, as well as the participation and contribution of individual members.

2) *Perfecting institutional guarantees:* According to the actual characteristics of school-based scientific research, the school should establish a school-based scientific research operation system of "decision-making regulation by the principal's office — consultation and guidance by relevant experts — specific responsibility by the academic affairs office — implementation by teachers". According to school's own conditions, advantages and characteristics, school should highlight the theme of cooperative learning by the basic guiding function of system. Moreover, school should invite experts from different professional fields, such as psychology, pedagogy and behavioristics, to carry out relevant training for teachers, prepare lessons together, share experience of cooperative learning and summary reflection regularly, write teaching cases and organize the research group. The school can also organize teachers summarize and record cooperation training materials, including courseware, case and solution in the process of cooperation, gradually formed unique practical value resource sharing center, as to improve teachers' education level and ability of cooperation and make the first-line teachers undertake the responsibility for the implementation of cooperative learning.

## V. CONCLUSION

In short, cooperative group learning not only changes the form of teaching and learning in class, but also highlights students' dominant position and respects their individual

differences, which pursues the efficiency and fairness of class teaching. It is needed to continuously deepen the theoretical research and practical exploration of cooperative group learning, so that cooperative group learning can really be beneficial to the development of all students, the promotion of class teaching equity, and the realization of the goal of educational equity.

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