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Face-to-Face Verbal Communication and Social Skills: The Link to Adolescent Learning

Maggie Bell
University of Wyoming

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**Face-to-Face Verbal Communication and Social Skills:
The Link to Adolescent Learning**

By

Maggie Bell

Plan B Project

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Masters in Science in Natural Science
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Laramie, Wyoming

Masters Committee:

Alan Buss, Chair
Sylvia Parker
Diana Wigg

Abstract

The purpose of this project was to determine how adolescents learn, obtain appropriate methods of teaching that support academic success for adolescents, and outline basic teaching strategies to enhance communication and social skills of adolescents in the classroom. Research indicates that continual social change and education reform create challenges for educators in the classroom. Studies indicate that learning is naturally social, cultural, and communicative therefore, purposeful planning of the learning task, style of interaction, group size, and student characteristics are all necessary to support student success.

*Dedicated to my children Rachel and Artesia, to my grandson Brecken, and all of my students –
past, present, and future.*

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A loving thank you to my family, friends, and colleagues for supporting and encouraging me through this journey, and I thank my students for just being their unpredictable selves, who have influenced my growth in becoming a better person and teacher.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A Personal Perspective

The bell rings and the race is on; allotted time: fifty-five minutes. Students appear fidgety but are in fact switching gears to engage in a science lesson. As the instructions for the lab experiment are distributed, most students are thrilled, but some become anxious. The instructions are projected onto the white board for review by the students and teacher. Students don their aprons and goggles and assemble at their lab stations into pre-assigned lab groups. As they sit at their lab stations, some begin to socialize. Others plunder the equipment cart calling out, “Ms. Bell what do I need?” My standard reply is “What do the instructions say?” As the school year progresses, students eventually learn how to extract information from the instructions provided and are able to complete the lab assignments with less teacher interventions.

Although the students are sitting in groups interacting, what are they communicating? Some students discuss and record data, while others copy words and write numbers. One or two group members are assembling and manipulating equipment while other members are sitting quietly. Conversations fill the room. But, what is the relevancy of their discussions?

In my teaching I try to dedicate over 50% of instructional time to small group assignments. Small group assignments are primarily hands-on, with students working in a laboratory setting, manipulating equipment, while collecting data. The remaining time is reserved for whole group instruction including: content specific short lectures, demonstrations, and time for students to work independently on lab reports, assigned readings, and assessments.

Assessments are traditional paper/pencil, multiple choice, short answer tests and quizzes, and laboratory practicums. I arrange the classroom desks in pods of four and assign three to four students to each pod. Student groups are mixed gender but not necessarily mixed ability. This arrangement provides students the opportunity to interact, communicate, and learn from one another. I believe it is easier for students to understand science concepts when they are given the opportunity to interact in groups and communicate about science as they actively pursue the answers through hands-on experiences.

At the end of each school year, I always feel I can improve my teaching methods. My two perpetual goals are to increase the percentage of students who will be academically successful and to create an atmosphere where students feel comfortable and confident while learning science content in groups.

Developing Teaching Methods

A combination of undergraduate courses, professional development, and my teaching practice has influenced my approach to teaching. Yet, the most persuasive evidence supporting student success was proposed ten years ago when my school district introduced The Partnership for 21st Century Skills at a board meeting I attended.

In 2002, the United States Department of Education, in conjunction with eight companies, formed The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (The Partnership) (Taylor & Fratto, 2012). The Partnership developed a set of learning and thinking skills deemed necessary for preparing students to succeed in society and the workplace (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). At the time of the board meeting, the focus of professional development was on updating the existing hardware and use of technology to meet district and state standards. The purpose of the

presentation was to stress the reality that, given the rate at which technology is developed, it is impossible for teachers to teach students how to use all the varied and advanced technology available upon graduation from high school. It was suggested that the district should not only move toward more advanced technology, but also support the teaching and learning of 21st century skills. During the presentation, the following quote caught my attention: “The pressure is growing for us as teachers to prepare our students for jobs and careers that do not even exist today” (Taylor & Fratto, 2012, p. 8). With that in mind, the importance of teaching 21st century skills and a need to change my teaching practice became evident. In 2010, The Partnership changed its description of 21st century skills to make it easier for teachers to apply in the classroom. The emphasis is currently on critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, creativity, and communication as key skills that students should apply as they learn core subjects (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008).

Twenty first century skills continue to be the focus of my district’s professional development. With professional development comes the opportunity to reflect on my teaching practices and decide how my newly acquired skills, methods, and knowledge will be integrated into my curriculum. When reflecting on my teaching practice, I ask myself what I can do differently to motivate and engage my students in learning in order to increase their academic achievement and 21st century skills.

As I try each new strategy or method designed to teach 21st century skills using small group assignments (i.e. computer based lessons, differentiated instruction, project based learning, brain based learning, etc.), I feel somewhat unprepared to successfully orchestrate the challenging and elaborate techniques. Some students become confused or lose interest, while others appear unmotivated to try the new strategy or method. This leads to off-task and

inappropriate communication reinforced by too much freedom to interact and chat with peers. After numerous redirects and encouraging my students to focus on the learning target, I become frustrated. The lack of communication and social skills, fundamental to learning 21st century skills, is apparent among my students. Upon reflection, improving communication and social skills seems like the first hurdle I need to tackle in my pursuit to engage students in learning 21st century skills and increase academic achievement while working in small groups.

Purpose

The purpose of this literature review is two-fold: to understand how face-to-face verbal communication skills and social skill are developed; and explore the relationship between communication and learning while teaching adolescent students through small group assignments.

Research Question

How do face-to-face verbal communication and social skills contribute to learning in effective small groups with adolescent age students, and what can I do differently in my classroom to improve these skills?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Language Development

The development of language begins much earlier than one might expect, certainly before birth. By the third trimester, a fetus can hear and begins to learn by listening to the mother's voice (Birnholz & Benacerraf, 1983; DeCasper & Spence, 1986). The fetus is able to learn and remember characteristics specific to the mother's speech and speech style such as rhythm, intonation, and inflection (DeCasper & Spence, 1986). This may aid in the discrimination between speech and environmental sounds and becomes the foundation for language development after birth (DeCasper, Lecanuet, Busnel, Granier-Deferre, & Maugeais, 1994; Gerhardt & Abrams, 2000). Within days after birth infants show the same preferences to their mothers' voices as before birth (Mehler, Jusczyk, Lambertz, Halsted, Bertocini, & Amiel-Tison, 1988). This suggests that learning is taking place in the third trimester or possibly earlier (Dirix, Nijhuis, Jongsma, & Hornstra, 2009).

Language and learning continue to be intertwined based on the social acquisition and use of communication skills as newborns learn how to communicate with their caregivers (Vygotsky, 1978). These interactions are the newborns' first small group experiences. This communication is conducted in very subtle, non-verbal and verbal ways. Early communication skills include the use of rudimentary vocalizations, eye, head and body movements, and facial expressions in face-to-face type interactions (Hopkins, 1983; Wells, 2007).

As the central nervous system matures, infants continue to develop a non-linguistic vocabulary with the emergence of gestures such as finger pointing and signaling with their hands

(Bretherton & Bates, 1979). These gestures become more complex, intentional, and specific as the infants interact, communicate, and continue to seek an understanding of their physical and social environments. Gestures become a more apparent means of communication (Bretherton & Bates, 1979; Crais, Douglas, & Campbell, 2004). By nine months of age most infants are using gestures for the distinct intent of communication, such as requesting, refusing, showing, and giving as they learn about their surroundings (Bretherton & Bates, 1979).

Between 12 and 15 months the use of a gesture vocabulary begins to decline as toddlers develop another skill, a recognizable linguistic vocabulary. This is the beginning of children's efforts to transition to verbal communication (Carpenter, Mastergeorge, & Coggins, 1983). At this age communication is primarily monologic. Monologic discourse requires speaking information with no expectation of a response (Wells, 2007). Dialogic skills begin to develop as toddlers engage in conversations requiring a response from the listener (Carpenter et al., 1983; Wells, 2007). Learning dialogic skills marks the beginning of face-to-face dialogic communication (Wells, 2007).

Around 18 months of age, children begin to learn new vocabulary at an astonishing rate, accompanied by many grammatical and contextual mistakes (Gershkoff-Stowe, 2002). Children learn syntax and meaning as they practice speaking words through social interaction with their caregiver, family, and community, thus reducing errors while improving their monologic and dialogic communication skills and mental ability.

By 24 months of age, children in all cultures are verbally communicating with their caregivers with increasing accuracy (Wells, 2007). At 28 months the majority of children have become extremely skilled at learning words immediately upon exposure and have the potential to be unlimited learners (Gershkoff-Stowe, 2002).

The rate at which children learn to communicate is closely related to how often they are exposed to language in the form of normal conversations with others throughout the day (Wells, 2007). The caregivers' behavior (how often they engage in conversations and ask questions), while interacting with a young child, provides vocabulary practice by learning, memorizing, and retrieving information. The more practice, the more cognitive and linguistic gain the child will experience (Gershkoff-Stowe, 2002).

Given the social nature of learning, Wells (2007) suggests that adults should provide opportunities for children to learn their community's way of "acting, thinking, valuing, and accepting ways of communicating their thoughts and feelings about their experiences" (p. 262). Caregivers may provide opportunities for communication and learning in the home with the best intentions, but given a variety of social hierarchies and cultural norms, children develop different communication styles and habits towards learning.

Monologic and dialogic communication styles, of normal developing children, are shaped by their interactions with others and influence learning habits. Research by Hasan (2002) recognized how the style of communication between the caregiver and the child is influenced by the caregiver's social positioning within their work place. Hasan referred to social positioning as two main groups: "dominating and dominated social groups" (p. 540). The dominating social groups have a level of power within their workplace whereas the dominated social groups do not (Hasan, 2002). After analyzing conversations between the caregiver and child from the two groups, Hasan (2002) determined that the dominating social group caregiver communicated in a formative mode in contrast to an informative mode by the dominated social group caregiver. The formative style of communication presumes children may acquire their habits of learning through interaction and discussion, a dialogue between the child and caregiver to gain an

understanding of an experience. However, children exposed to the informative style of communication may acquire their habits of learning by simply accepting information by engaging in a monologue with no discussion or further inquiry (Hasan, 2002). By the age of three and one half to four years, children of the dominating and dominated social groups have already developed different habits of learning, problem solving, and awareness (Wells, 2007). Consequentially, some children learn to question the world around them to make sense and gain conceptual knowledge through conversations (dialogic), while other children accept the world as spoken to them (monologic) without questioning or understanding why. Thus, dialogic communication with adults plays a significant role as children learn and conceptualize the world around them.

Caregivers may arrange opportunities for children to expand their communication skills and social experiences outside the home as well. Groups available for children to participate in are generally sports groups (e.g., soccer and dance) and social groups (e.g., clubs and Sunday school). Even though it may be the intent of the caregiver, group activities outside the home rarely focus on communication skills. Most of the available group activities for young children discourage talking and focus on the child developing an individual skill (Socha & Socha, 1994).

Out of necessity, the role of a caregiver often extends to day-care centers. Children are placed in a setting, outside the home, potentially offering limited face-to-face communication with an adult. However, a study by Hargrave and Sénéchal (2000) suggested a day-care center can be a positive influence on a child's learning and language development. Children with poor vocabulary skill learned new vocabulary while actively participating in story time. The reader asked the children "wh" questions, for example: why, where, what, etc., to promote discussion. As the children participated in discussions, they became active listeners, which stimulated

thinking. Hargrave and Sénéchal (2000) called this type of book reading “dialogic reading” (p. 80). The children involved in dialogic reading groups demonstrated a substantial improvement in language use as compared to the children in regular reading groups (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000).

Communication and learning styles are directly related to culture. Understanding this relationship is a complex matter because within a cultural group, individual learning styles exist as well (Guild, 1994). Cultures may support taking turns to speak, overlapping talk, expressing emotions verbally or physically. Exposing children from all cultures to a wide range of experiences and interactions enables children from different cultures to build on their established communication and social skills (Blank, 2012).

Whether inside or outside the home, children are cared for differently, thus forming a variety of habits toward learning and communication. Cultural differences and limited practice of dialogic communication may contribute to children entering primary school with inadequate vocabulary and communication skills which limits their social and academic learning.

The Social Nature of Learning

At all ages, people find it helpful to think through ideas and decision making by communicating with their friends and/or family for greater insight (Wells, 2007). The link between a child’s social interactions and cognitive gain is reflected in the research of Lev Vygotsky in the early 1900’s. Vygotsky (1978) describes two developmental levels defining a child’s ability: actual developmental level and the zone of proximal development. The actual developmental level is measured by standardized examination of the linguistic and cognitive ability of a child and enables the educator to understand the “level of development of the child’s

mental functions that have been established as a result of certain already *completed* developmental cycles” (Vygotsky, 1978). This information allows school personnel and the educator to identify students who are functioning below grade level and create a plan designed to address these deficiencies. The actual developmental level only shows the level of difficulty of what children can do alone. This is the level from which most educators measure and monitor growth. The zone of proximal development is measured differently. Vygotsky (1978) states:

It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (p. 86)

Understanding the zone of proximal development in children allows educators to provide appropriate learning opportunities beyond the child’s capabilities. The social nature of working cooperatively with peers in small groups, as children engage in collaborative problem solving activities, promotes development of a higher mental level (Vygotsky, 1978).

Learning through cooperation and collaboration implies communication with others. Given the opportunity to think aloud and communicate with others, students will talk their way through the problem, becoming actively involved in the construction of knowledge. When children use their own words to communicate they are learning language patterns of the subject. Speaking the pattern leads to learning (Lemke, 1989). Observations of children, by R. E. Levivna, demonstrate the relationship between a child’s speech and attaining a goal (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) claims “their speech and action are part of *one and the same complex psychological function*, directed toward the solution of the problem at hand” (p. 25). If children are to remain silent, they may not be able to complete the learning task (Vygotsky, 1978).

Investigations of memory by Vygotsky (1978) have revealed a shift from learning through memorization in childhood to learning through abstract concepts in adolescence.

Vygotsky (1962) maintains:

The tasks with which society confronts an adolescent as he enters the cultural, professional, and civic world of adults undoubtedly become an important factor in the emergence of conceptual thinking. If the milieu presents no such tasks to the adolescent, makes no new demands on him, and does not stimulate his intellect by providing a sequence of new goals, his thinking fails to reach the highest stages, or reaches them with great delay. (p. 108)

As children transition into adolescence, communication within their social environment becomes a fundamental stage in learning (Aldridge & Ivey, 1975). Not only do they experience rapid physical growth, but their behavior signals the beginning of abstract reasoning skills that will be affected by relationships (Turkstra, 2000; Kessler, Ibrahim, & Kahn, 1986). Vygotsky (1962) points out that “learning to direct one’s own mental processes with the aid of words or signs is an integral part of the process of concept formation. The ability to regulate one’s actions by using auxiliary means reaches its full development only in adolescence” (p. 108). At this point an adolescent begins to seek social groups outside their family as they continue to learn and develop a conceptual understanding of their environment (Turkstra, 2000).

In the classroom, adolescents are often preoccupied by their physical appearance, emerging sexuality, peer group association, and mood swings, resulting in increased classroom management demands on the educator (Turkstra, 2000). Although passive learning may be conducive to managing a middle school classroom filled with adolescents, it is mentally stifling. Teachers should take advantage of this unique transitional stage by working with, instead of

against, the social nature of adolescents. Challenging adolescents academically and socially in cooperative learning groups through structured methods can positively influence how students interact socially and achieve academically (Cohen, 1994; King, 2002). Now more than ever it is important for the educator to understand their role when educating 21st century adolescents.

Communication Skills, Social Skills, and Cooperative Learning

As previously stated, social communication skills begin developing very early in life and need to continue developing throughout life. The concept that dialogue is central to the construction of knowledge arose at least 2,400 years ago, around the time of Socrates (Wells, 2007). Children entering into formal education require a challenging environment that stimulates productive conversation. Barnes (1992) proposed, “learning to communicate is at the heart of education” (p. 20). Barnes (1992) expands the meaning of communication as not only being oral, but using pictures, diagrams and symbols as well.

Acquiring effective communication skills to engage academically with teachers and classmates, as well as casual conversations with peers, is a fundamental social skill and plays a significant role in the overall success of the individual (Rutherford, Mathur, & Quinn, 1998). Learning communication skills necessitates the learning of social skills (Blatchford, Kutnick, Baines, & Galton, 2003). Cartledge et al (2008) suggests culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students should receive proactive social skill training at an early age. CLD learners may not recognize the culture of the school and their actions may inadvertently be interpreted as noncompliant. Punitive consequences for misunderstood CLD learners interfere with their academic success whereas positive intervention provides the opportunity for CLD learners to practice and obtain the appropriate social skills of the school culture. For CLD learners, positive

interventions that address academics as well as social skills are vital for success (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008).

At all ages communication and social skills are best learned through practice in social groupings. Small group interaction in the classroom gives students the opportunity to have a voice in a more relaxed environment. Students are able to speak less formally and engage in conversations which they would normally not participate in during a whole group setting.

Students placed in cooperative learning groups that promote communication are capable of controlling their own communication strategies and think aloud as they formulate hypotheses and synthesize information (Barnes, 1992). Benefits of cooperative learning groups are gained through students working together in small groups where each student is motivated to participate in shared tasks with clear expectations. Teacher support is kept to a minimum, allowing students to arrive at their own conclusions (Cohen, 1994).

Social qualities, especially for verbal communication, are vital for effective cooperative learning groups and will require students to learn specific communication and social skills. These skills can be taught prior to participation in cooperative learning groups or while the groups are functioning (Cohen, 1994; Kessler, Ibrahim, & Kahn, 1986; Aldridge & Ivey, 1975). Johnson and Johnson (2013) identified communication among group members as a complex process and the main aspect of effective groups. They refer to patterns of interaction, rather than skills, to promote effective communication. The ability to send and receive messages and understand and draw conclusions must be done at the same time. Given a problem to solve, group members must pool information, put the information together, and arrive at a solution. The manner in which group members interact as they communicate must create a climate of trust, acceptance, and honesty.

Students in a cooperative learning group work together to encourage and help one another understand the material. Each student contributes to the discussion and is committed to the success of the group (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Extensive research by Johnson and Johnson (1999) resulted in “the five basic elements that make cooperation work” (p. 67). These five basic elements are considered essential in order for an activity to be truly cooperative. *Positive interdependence* is a relationship between all group members to succeed together. *Individual accountability* ensures each group member is doing their share of the work. *Face-to-face promotive interaction* provides positive, supportive, and encouraging communication, peer teaching, and discussions about the skills and concepts being learned. *Social skills* require students to consider the wellbeing of others in the group and not just their own self interests. Lastly, *group processing* is necessary in order to discuss, identify, and solve group behavior problems, allowing greater success of the group (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

Of these five basic elements, positive interdependence is fundamental for effective cooperative learning groups. In 1949, Morton Deutsch developed social interdependence theory, composed of positive interdependence and negative interdependence (Deutsch, 1949; Gillies, 2004). Positive interdependence occurs when all students working in a cooperative learning group desire to reach a known learning goal and understand that the learning goal can only be reached by the effort of all group members (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 2013; Gillies, 2004). If positive interdependence is not present then competitive efforts dominate, resulting in negative interdependence, making cooperative learning groups less effective (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). Therefore, a cooperative versus a competitive mode of communication in groups is advantageous. Competitive behaviors, while communicating, may lead to exclusion, misunderstandings, and anger and should not be allowed (Johnson & Johnson, 2013).

Not all tasks are suited for cooperative learning groups. Tasks that can be completed individually and are clear cut with one correct answer will be accomplished individually even though students are seated in groups. The type of interaction students engage in during the learning task fosters positive interdependence, within cooperative learning groups. Activities that are specifically designed to promote communication in a small group setting should include learning skills for face-to-face communication. Susan Lyle (1993) conducted an investigation with 5th and 6th grade students. The students worked in groups of four on activities intended for cooperative and collaborative learning styles. The activities were designed by Lyle (1993) to ensure all students participated in making decisions and were able to justify their contributions. Students were motivated to think and share ideas within the group without the presence of Lyle (1993). From the transcripts of the audio-recordings, Lyle (1993) explains:

Groups showed children actively engaged in their own learning. They argued rationally, hypothesized, reflected upon and evaluated their ideas, and used language to do this effectively. The talk was structured by the activities and was the means whereby a higher order cognitive style was used by the children to jointly construct meaning. (p. 189)

Lyle (1993) also designed the activities to emphasize active learning and language. Consequently, the activity and not the teacher facilitated the desired outcome. Purposefully designed activities presented the opportunity for the children to participate in face-to-face communication, building on prior knowledge, while attaining a higher level of mental function (Lyle, 1993). Lyle (1993) helps educators understand that children can increase their level of knowledge through communicating their ideas and opinions as they work toward a shared goal. It is also important to design social interaction activities which will provide students the

opportunity to be critical of others opinions, and ask questions empowering them to recognize themselves as responsible learners (Kuhn, 1993; Lyle, 1993).

Another strategy designed to promote face-to-face communication is a structured method called Guided Reciprocal Peer Questioning (GRPQ). Students do not automatically think and communicate about the material being presented by the teacher (King, 1993). King (2002, 2008) describes GRPQ as a strategy that structures communication between group members, using questions to guide student communication. King (2002) developed a series of content free, generic starter questions for students to use as a template when developing their own questions. Students can be required to use a variety of questions ranging from factual to thought provoking. At the basic level, factual questions are memory based and only require recall, whereas thought provoking question require students to think about prior and existing knowledge to formulate new knowledge (King, 2002, 2008). Teaching students to use GRPQ is essential in successful implementation and requires “training, modeling, guidance, and application practice in skills of question asking, question sequencing, explaining, and inferencing” (King, 2008). King (2008) provides guidelines to help teachers implement GRPQ through scaffolding. The teacher begins with modeling the formulation of questions, moving to responding to the question, and then question sequencing. Students can begin by initially working in pairs to practice writing questions and responding, moving to independently formulating questions to be used in a small group setting (King, 2008). As students learn and use GRPQ, regardless of the level of questioning and answering, they are inadvertently using multiple patterns of communication (King, 2002).

Grouping practices play an important role in the desired outcome of group work. To facilitate communication through cooperative learning groups, Johnson and Johnson (2013)

provide basic rules for grouping practices. Initially the teacher must decide the size of the group, how group members will be selected, duration of the group, and if the lesson requires multiple groupings (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). Small groups (2-4) are recommended especially when the students are first learning cooperative group skills. Small groups take less time to organize, make it harder for students to go unnoticed, and are less complicated. When difficulties working together arise, they are easier to identify and resolve. Over all, groups need to be small enough to guarantee all students are actively engaged, contributing, and participating equally (Johnson & Johnson, 2013).

Heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping can be used for cooperative learning groups. Heterogeneous grouping is advantageous because students with different backgrounds, abilities, and experiences lend to different viewpoints and problem solving ideas. Homogeneous grouping can be problematic if based on friendships, same gender and ability (Blatchford et al., 2003).

An awareness of how learning is naturally social, cultural, and communicative suggests teachers should pay closer attention to the way teaching and learning is designed in their classrooms (Lyle, 1993). Purposeful planning of the learning task, style of interaction, group size, and student characteristics will result in greater academic achievement (Blatchford et al., 2003).

Teacher Challenges

Teachers may believe cooperative learning is an effective method to teach students social and communication skill in addition to learning academically (Cohen, Brody, & Sapon-Shevin, 2004; Lopata, Miller, & Miller, 2003; Lumpe, Haney, & Czerniak, 1998; McManus & Gettinger, 1996). However, 21st century teachers face several challenges when teaching adolescents

communication and social skills through cooperative learning groups. A common challenge arises from a change in the family structure, leading adolescents to relying strictly on their friends for learning and developing values, cultural behaviors, and social skills (Gibbs, 2006). Equally challenging is classroom management without an understanding and utilization of basic grouping practices related to the social context of group work (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). Perhaps the problem lies within the interpretation and relative amount of publicity and funding that is tied to education reform policies that challenge teachers to prepare students to master state and national standards in addition to acquiring 21st century skills (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008).

Social Changes

Gibbs (2006) brings to our attention to American culture. Moving from the Industrial Age into the Information Age has impacted the average American family. In eighty percent of two-parent families both parents work, and single parent families are on the rise, resulting in an average of 27 minutes spent together as family time (Gibbs, 2006). As a result, schools supervise children for most of their day. Teacher focused classrooms and standardized text and tests are no longer effective. It is essential for schools to teach pro-social attitudes, ethics, and skills at all levels of education (Gibbs, 2006; Kessler et al., 1986). Children, adolescents, and adults who have not had the opportunity to learn basic social skills are more prone to participate in delinquent behaviors, experience peer rejection, and develop mental health problems, all which can lead to academic failure (Rutherford et al., 1998).

Alternatively, Rutherford et al (1998) found that teaching and learning communication skills using cooperative group structure “provided natural opportunities for social interaction, positive interdependence, and mutual trust” (pg. 366). Therefore, teaching and reinforcing appropriate communication skills in an educational setting is a proactive method to improve

academic achievement and social skills as well as reduce delinquency (Rutherford et al., 1998; Yager, Johnson, & Johnson, 1985). High school programs addressing communication and social skills aid in mental and personal development and are noticeably linked to the effectiveness of academic achievement later in life (Kessler et al., 1986).

Building meaningful connections and emotional bonds through conversation positively affect student behavior. Jeanne Gibbs (2006), author of *Reaching All by Creating Tribes Learning Communities (Tribes)*, has collaborated with teachers and administrators to develop a process that focuses on the social and emotional development of twenty first century children, kindergarten through secondary, along with academic achievement.

Tribes was initially designed to prevent substance use and address specific behavioral problems in schools. The drug education curriculum was delivered through small, active learning groups in an inclusive community environment (Gibbs, 2006). The successes of *Tribes* lead teachers to the realization that they could teach academic curriculum through small groups. Incorporating academic content into a social skill development process enabled all students to participate in cooperative learning groups (Gibbs, 2006). Teachers and students came together to build a caring community within the school and classroom, promoting academic, social, and emotional learning. This resulted in decreased behavioral problems, positive relationships, and academic success (Gibbs, 2006). Positive relationships between students, students and teachers, and teachers decrease dropout rates and increase motivation to achieve in groups (Gibbs, 2006; Gillies, 2004).

Tribes utilizes the competencies and foundational elements outlined in a 1990 report by the U. S. Department of Labor and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) that researched the skills needed for employment. Five competencies (resources,

interpersonal skills, information, systems, and technology) along with three foundational elements (basic skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities) were recognized (U.S. Department of Labor, Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991). The success of *Tribes* confirmed that all eight skills play an essential role in education.

Classroom Management

While in addition to acknowledging the positive qualities of cooperative learning, teachers also agree the use of cooperative learning causes off task behavior and takes too much instructional time and planning (Lumpe et al., 1998; Lopata et al., 2003). Classroom management becomes more challenging while implementing cooperative learning methods. Multiple groups engaging in spontaneous conversations at the same time requires teachers to let go of traditional quiet classrooms as they reinforce the use of appropriate social and communication skills.

The Social Pedagogic Research into Group Work (SPRinG) project addresses group work in a social context and brings to light some of the problems associated with group work that are directly related to grouping practices. First of all, learning tasks are often procedural or practice based, suited for individual learning. However, students are arranged in groups, overlooking the social context of group work. Consequently, students are found in groups working independently not cooperatively. Also, some groups are too large and may require interventions by the teacher or result in students pairing up, excluding others. Similarly, groups of the same sex and ability are generally formed because of friendships, promoting side conversations, and are socially exclusive as well. Additionally, if groups are rearranged often, group stability may be hindered or disrupted (Blatchford et al., 2003; King, 2008).

Socha and Socha (1994) compared five discussions of first graders as they worked in groups to accomplish a set of tasks. During this study, discussions appeared “chaotic” (p. 237) and “silly” (p. 243), making it difficult for the teacher to surrender control over the classroom behavior. It was not easy for the teacher to resist involvement because children turned to the teacher, if present, to solve a problem instead of talking their way to a solution with their peers (Socha & Socha, 1994). Teachers are challenged with letting go of initiating and assessing each student’s contribution. Instead, teachers should step aside to provide opportunities for students to communicate when they have a thought that they want to express (Wells, 2007). The difficulty educator’s face is finding the balance between too much and not enough structure. School administrators focused on standardized testing results in a rigid environment with continuous judgment. This causes teachers to fear poor evaluations and possible termination based on student achievement on standardized tests and a seemingly lack of classroom management skills (Cohen et al., 2004).

With this said, in order to promote face-to face communication and self-management skills, it is necessary to teach young children pro-social ways: conjoint decision making, ways to facilitate participation of all group members, manage interruptions and noise, and how to manage critical and attacking messages (Socha & Socha, 1994; McManus & Gettinger, 1996). Interestingly, the problems observed “in the first graders’ discussions do not seem radically different from those encountered by adults. This suggests the critical role of education in developing competent group communicators” (Socha & Socha, 1994, p. 245). The overall research results of Socha and Socha (1994) revealed that with practice children can develop face-to-face communication skills without continuous teacher involvement. When left on their own, first grade children participated in face-to-face communication, rendering small group activities

effective. If group communication skills are not taught or developed at an early age, children may advance through school and into adulthood with inadequate communication skills (Socha & Socha, 1994)

External Policies

In the early 1980's, the National Commission on Excellence in Education was developed to investigate education. As a result, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983) reported "a rising tide of mediocrity" stemming from increasing demands on schools to solve personal, social, and political problems which have had an educational cost (p. 9). Recognition was given to new skills necessary for the new Information Age to remain competitive in world markets by understanding complex issues and using technological equipment, including a need for intellectual, moral, and spiritual strength. Recommendations suggested a more rigorous curriculum, measurable standards, a longer school day/year, and improved teacher preparatory programs, but failed to address the societal problems and needs associated with entering into the Information Age (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Almost two decades later, NCLB, SCANS, and The Partnership emerged, collectively recognizing the need to restructure the way schools approached education. NCLB regulations were tied to school funding, and consequently was fully embraced leaving SCANS and The Partnership in its shadow (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003; U.S. Department of labor, Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991). As a result, education entered into a new era of academic accountability, measured through standardized testing, while hindered by the lack of social, learning, and thinking skills addressed by SCANS and The Partnership (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003).

Educators and children are evaluated and judged from the very first day of school.

Educators are required to exhibit classroom management skills, placing the educator in control of all student actions and learning at all times along with the accountability of academic growth and student achievement. Children are required to learn the curriculum and follow the rules.

Children will begin to adhere to new rules and customs as they become a part of a new type of community but do not necessarily learn the curriculum as anticipated. Methods historically used by educators to promote academic growth (whole class instruction, use of standardized text books, rote memorization, individual work, and competition) require children to sit passively, leading to educational mediocrity and unsuccessful students (Cohen et al., 2004; Gibbs, 2006).

Due to external policies, supporting the teaching of 21st century skills through the use of cooperative learning groups in an educational setting is becoming difficult to maintain. NCLB legislation values basic skills and high stakes testing for the sake of maintaining accountability (Wells, 2007). This limits teachers and functions contrary to the teacher's ability and willingness to use cooperative learning to deliver curriculum (Cohen et al., 2004). Educators see NCLB as limiting because preparation for standardized testing leads to less time for learning opportunities through spontaneous conversation in cooperative learning groups (Wells, 2007).

Without the support of the school administrators, secondary teachers may be less committed to using cooperative learning in their classroom and will teach how they were taught. This implies a traditional classroom structure with a lecture/question format, causing students to be competitive rather than cooperative (Gibbs, 2006). Consequently, children are often faced with unchallenging goals at each grade level as they learn to regurgitate information for testing purposes.

Chapter 3

Discussion

Reflection

Basically, adolescents are capable of learning and working cooperatively in small groups if they are motivated and equipped with the necessary communication and social skills. Communication skills and social skill are related; therefore, they can be learned simultaneously. Students need to learn the patterns of communications, which include listening, questioning, evaluating, restating, debating, and recognizing alternative points of view. At the same time students need to become responsible for their own behavior by practicing pro-social ways, while being supportive, trustworthy, and respectful.

I have several thoughts about the relationship between communication skills, social skills, and learning through small group assignments when teaching adolescents. These thoughts are based on the literature I have reviewed and my 16 years of experience in teaching adolescent age students.

I think that learning in small groups is multifaceted. Foremost, students require communication and social skills that are not direct by-products of small group work: therefore, they must be taught, modeled, and reinforced throughout all developmental stages. Additionally, students must possess positive interdependence; a desire to work cooperatively with others to complete a task. Consequently, the task must be structured to promote cooperative learning. The ability to build positive relationships is essential to student success, in and out of the classroom. These skills and attitudes are the foundation of learning in effective small groups.

Future Plans

To lead students to communicate with their peers, I plan to use the Guided Reciprocal Peer Questioning (GRPQ) strategy. Focusing on this questioning strategy will promote a higher-level understanding of the lesson and influence the use of more complex patterns of communication. Access to generic question stems will aid in implementation and serve as a model until students understand how to create their own questions.

Positive interdependence can be created through the design of the task, but it also requires group members to build positive relationships by being supportive, trustworthy and respectful. These are qualities I can teach, model, and require students to exhibit. However, I need to provide the opportunity for students to develop these qualities through socializing and working with others. In addition, students working in peer groups require an understanding of pro-social ways. Teaching students how to: include all group members in decision making, take turns during discussions, share information and ideas, maintain appropriate voice level, and deal with derogatory and aggressive behavior in a respectful way will facilitate positive peer relationships.

Another aspect of teaching communication skills is allowing time for group members to provide feedback to one another relative to group dynamics. It is important for the group to recognize the qualities of their interaction in order to improve. I can provide students with the opportunity to review and modify group norms, placing the responsibility on the students to manage behavior also related to building positive relationships. Developing classroom norms, which encompass pro-social ways and encourage support, trust, and respect will serve as a model as students establish norms for small group assignments.

There are other features I can manage to encourage positive interdependence. I can organize the physical environment of the classroom as needed and strategically group students. For instance, the physical environment of my classroom is divided into two seating areas; one with individual desks and one with tables and stools. Each area can act as a visual reminder of the intent of the assignment. Students seated at individual desks can expect whole group instruction with fewer distractions from peers. Whole group instruction will be reserved for introducing new skills, concepts, and strategies. Students seated at tables in small groups can expect assignments that require students to work together cooperatively.

Small groups will be formed with two to four students. When groups are larger than four, it is more difficult for the students to manage their behavior, thus requiring the teacher to step in, taking away from students practicing pro-social ways. Heterogeneous grouping of students is beneficial to student interaction. Mixed ability eliminates high-level students competing with each other and reduces the chance of several low level students not having enough previous knowledge to begin communicating to complete the task. Personality is also a factor. If all group members are relatively quiet and shy they work at a much slower pace. The same is true for groups formed with multiple assertive, outspoken students, which can lead to difficulties in working together, thus taking longer to complete the task. Male students have a tendency to work independently whereas female students may desire to be in control, working against positive interdependence.

In a small town setting, I believe socioeconomic status plays a role as well. Students can spend multiple years in school with the same group of classmates. Social status has influenced the social grouping of friends and the shaping of attitudes towards other groups. This results in exclusive and reclusive behaviors in the classroom. Social status groups become obvious within

the first few weeks of school. Students can be grouped more successfully for long term cooperative learning groups once ability, personality, and social status are revealed. Group members should remain the same throughout the year, or at least throughout one semester, otherwise more time is needed for the group to reestablish the trust, support, and respect that have been created.

My lessons should be reevaluated to distinguish if they are suited for whole group instruction, small group assignments, or a combination of both. I believe embedding the GRPQ strategy into different stages of my lessons will assist students in developing foundational skills. As students experience success academically and in relationships they will be motivated to continue improving their communication and social skills essential to academic achievement.

I am in the process of designing and implementing a generic Facilitator Instructions sheet that will lead my students through each stage of an assignment (APPENDIX 1). Students will work in heterogeneous groups of three to four. A facilitator will be appointed to manage the time spent on each task, record required information, and ensure that all group members complete all. Students are required to use GRPQ at a predetermined level of questioning. The students are encouraged to give feedback about the Facilitator Instructions sheet during a whole group discussion. Their feedback enables me to modify and improve the instructions while providing students with a sense of ownership toward their learning.

I have come to understand that it is not “what” I teach but “how” I teach it. The students who used Stage 1 Facilitator Instructions stayed on task, engaged in deeper and more meaningful conversations, challenged themselves and each other by developing higher-level questions, exhibited positive interdependence, and were able to work cooperatively with minimal teacher intervention. Students were physically engaged as well as mentally engaged. I am also

developing a set of criteria, which group assignments must incorporate in order to be used in conjunction with each stage of the Facilitator Instruction sheet. So far, my existing lessons are requiring minimal, if any, adjustments, which have made me recognize it is not “what” my students are learning it is “how” they are learning as well.

Closing Thoughts

Finally, a conversation has been started with my colleagues regarding how to carve out more time for professional collaboration. As I share student success stories, I believe other teachers will be interested in the steps I have taken to teach and reinforce foundational skills in order to improve student achievement socially as well as academically.

Becoming overwhelmed with curricular and administrative demands and consequently cycling back into a less stressful method, involving more whole class instruction and individualized learning, is not an option. Concentrating on one facet of cooperative learning, developing foundational skills will be a challenge, but if successful, I believe student academic achievement will increase.

Ultimately, teachers will need time to continually evaluate and redesign current lessons and work collaboratively with colleagues to implement the changes necessary to effectively and consistently prepare students for the challenge of participating in the rapidly changing global economy. I have recognized a consistent thread, which holds my teaching practice together, the student. Embracing their imperfections, as well as my own, gives perspective to my profession. Stephen Cope (2012) teaches us to “Think of the small as large” (p.51). Each small change in my teaching practice, my students, and me leads us to the bigger picture, one that is never complete, but always a work in progress.

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APPENDIX A

STAGE 1 FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS

Facilitator _____

Group members:

Time:	Check box After the task is completed. Move to next task.
	<input type="checkbox"/> Record the time allotted for each task
	<input type="checkbox"/> Read and annotate the entire assignment
	<input type="checkbox"/> Share one annotation with the group
	Name _____ Annotation _____ Name _____ Annotation _____ Name _____ Annotation _____ Name _____ Annotation _____
	<input type="checkbox"/> On a separate sheet of paper develop 1 question for each vocabulary word in bold print. Provide a space to answer question.
	Circle Level of questioning: 1 2 3 4
	<input type="checkbox"/> Switch questions with a person in your "partner" lab group.
	<input type="checkbox"/> Answer questions, neatly, on their lab paper.
	<input type="checkbox"/> Move to lab area and begin assignment.