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Development of socio-emotional skills through cooperative learning in a university environment

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Abstract

This paper presents the results obtained on the socio-emotional variables arising from a cooperative learning project conducted in the university classroom. The idea of using this type of methodology comes mainly from the experience of university lecturers with regard to the routine difficulties encountered by students in groupwork sessions.

For this research project, a Likert scale questionnaire was used on a sample of 103 undergraduates reading degrees in Pre-School Education and Primary Education, in order to evaluate a possible improvement in the students' acquisition of socio-emotional skills. Once the research was completed in a cooperative learning classroom, the results reflected greater empathy and assertiveness among group members, as well as greater cohesion and confidence in reaching agreements and accepting views which differ from their own. Therefore, we can establish a positive relationship between the use of a cooperative methodology and an improvement in the socio-emotional skills of university students

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1. Introduction

Today's University is increasingly diverse, due to the origin of students (different countries and cultures) and their socioeconomic status, characteristics or interests. This diversity in the classroom, along with the non-stop development of technologies, has required students and lecturers to increase their degree of adaptation and flexibility to an ever-

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changing reality. What is more, the incorporation of universities into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has led to the adoption of methodologies which, along with the increase in the number of work placement programmes within courses, foster the combination of individual work with interpersonal interaction and teamwork, the latter being one of the generic competencies for students to develop.

However, this diversity and this methodological model do not appear to be free from difficulties. There is a widespread perception among faculty of "the existence of a climate of interpersonal relationships in the classroom, yet in the performance of student-to-student tasks there is a strong individualistic, competitive, sparsely collaborative and non-supportive character, which barely considers mutual assistance" (Sánchez Marin et al., 2015, p. 177). The usual conflicts of any type of collaborative work seem to be accentuated in young people with many emotional and affective resources, but who at times are poorly accustomed to channelling them and adapting them to situations in the most appropriate way. Likewise, an increase is reflected in anxiety processes in increasingly younger people, sometimes with few psychological and emotional tools to face the personal and relationship difficulties which they encounter. This aspect is clearly reflected when conducting teamwork and coping with exams.

There is increasing empirical evidence which leads us to think that fostering students' socio-emotional competencies "may be a useful tool for addressing incipient negative emotions in different social and/or learning contexts and for ultimately being a factor that effectively facilitates problem solving and information processing" (Cassullo and García, 2015, p. 215). Some authors even suggest the need to introduce the teaching of social and emotional aspects into the curriculum. Gutiérrez and Expósito (2015) point out that there are several areas of life in which we engage in teamwork or collaborative working, so "if a person tends to be individualistic, they will struggle to develop social skills in order to be emotionally competent in relationships with others, and therefore will not have self-control or control over others when in situations of social interaction" (p. 43).

In an attempt to alleviate the difficulties encountered, the Catholic University San Antonio of Murcia launched an innovation project based on improving the socio-emotional skills of students through the use of the collaborative learning in the classroom strategy, because there is evidence in literature to that effect (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec, 1999; De Miguel (Coord), 2006a, 2006b; Gil Montoya et al, 2007; Rendón, 2015) which links the systematic and explicit incorporation of effective cooperative learning structures to improved socio-emotional competencies in people, thereby creating a more comprehensive education which is attentive to intercultural diversity and answers the heterogeneous needs that identify university students today.

This paper analyses the results of students from one of the subjects covered by the project, namely the 4th year of the Degree in Pre-School Education and the Degree in Primary Education, in order to discover whether the cooperative learning methodology improves the socio-emotional competencies of university students.

Collaborative, as improving these competencies in the university environment is not an unimportant question because, aside from creating more collaborative and happier citizens, it will encourage students to participate and actively engage in the different sectors of society for their own personal benefit and development. This is another task - within the framework of personalised attention - which today's University has in mind.

2. Methodology

The empirical work of the study is based on a quantitative approach and framed within a cooperative learning methodology. This methodology is based on a project already underway at the Primary Education stage and developed by Arnaiz and Linares (2010), through which the authors suggest a number of criteria that have been followed in the classroom for the proper development of the methodology:

- Student information: Before beginning the task, the lecturer explained the key aspects of cooperative learning to the students.
- Explanation of the task and time frame.
- Development of the activity and monitoring by the lecturer.
- Evaluation of how the experience of cooperative working developed.

Upon completion of the cooperative learning methodology in the classroom, an evaluation was made of the development of the socio-emotional intelligence competencies in the students participating in this methodology.

The instrument used for evaluating the development of socio-emotional competencies through a cooperative

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