School Library Cooperative Learning Model: Post-Pandemic Application for Student Management

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In my prior experiences as an elementary, middle, and high school librarian, I had the privilege of serving as the librarian for a brand-new school. In one of the professional development meetings prior to the opening of the school, the principal, Jesse K. Smith, noted that “learning cannot occur without discipline.” The statement had personal meaning as several of my peers were working in schools where student behaviors severely impacted their ability to teach effectively. Smith’s statement also proves timely in the current post-pandemic era.

In my current position in higher education, I prepare individuals, some with teaching experience and others without experience in K-12 education, for a career as a school librarian. In a Children’s Literature session I was teaching prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I opened the floor for a discussion about current issues in education. The students in the course were current classroom teachers or classroom teachers who recently migrated into school librarian positions.

One person who had recently transitioned from a classroom teacher position to the school librarian position in the same school expressed great frustration in not being able to maintain a positive and productive school library learning environment as she had in her prior classroom experience. Her confidence was shaken as she had experienced success in classroom management as a traditional classroom teacher, but that did not translate to the school library. Parts of class sessions within the course were dedicated to discussing the differences between managing a traditional classroom and a school library. Discussions centered on sharing effective classroom management strategies and how those strategies can translate to managing a school library instruction program. One strategy I shared with the class, based on my prior experience as a school librarian, was the formulation of a team-based learning model via principles of cooperative learning, and how that model was adaptive to all grade levels.

With the return of learners to K-12 schools in 2022–23, the issue of student management remains current and more profound.
With the return of learners to K-12 schools in 2022-23, the issue of student management remains current and more profound. A recent survey of more than 1,000 district and school administrators, teachers, and student support staff noted that “eighty-four percent of teachers say that students are developmentally behind in self-regulation and relationship building compared to students prior to the pandemic” (EAB 2023, 1). Teachers reported that incidents of classroom violence have more than doubled and that educators are the target of increasingly disruptive behavior (EAB). These findings reinforce a National Center for Education Statistics (2022) survey that revealed student behavior development had been negatively affected in 84% of public schools.

The timely significance of this issue and its impact on school libraries served as an impetus for this article. It presents a research-based model of cooperative learning for school libraries, henceforth referenced as The School Library Cooperative Learning Model, that can facilitate improved socialization, building of relationships, behavior modification, and improved learning.

The School Library Cooperative Learning Model is grounded in existing school library management and cooperative learning research. The following literature review highlights research and theory supportive of the model. A detailed explanation of the model and examples of successful implementation and challenges in implementation follow the brief literature review.

**Review of Literature**

**School Library Management**

Existing literature addressing learner management in the school library is principally driven by practitioner-based recommendations aligned with action research or qualitative vignettes. Bishop and Cahall (2012) detailed positive classroom management strategies relating to diverse learners and methods for proactive behavior management. Pentland (2018) presented strategies for effective classroom management in the school library including: building relationships with learners; establishing clear and consistent procedures and routines; knowing when to stick with routines and to start over or ask for help; and having a plan that evolves over time. Weisburg (2020) noted that the school library instructional space is multi-dimensional, which presents unique challenges in comparison to the traditional classroom. These special challenges include having a larger space inclusive of shelves, display areas, a makerspace, and a workroom/production area. Managing learners in the school library presents unique behavioral and management challenges in comparison to the traditional classroom including:

- Potentially having multiple classes being simultaneously conducted in the library.

**Operant Conditioning: Positive and Negative Reinforcement, and Rewards**

A foundational component of The School Library Cooperative Learning Model is that of operant conditioning. B.F. Skinner (1998), in The Experimental Analysis of Operant Behavior: A History presented the theory of operant conditioning, noting that behavior associated with a positive reward is likely to be repeated and behavior followed by negative reward is less likely to be repeated. Skinner noted that positive reinforcement occurs when a stimulus is added to increase the likelihood of a behavior, while negative reinforcement occurs when a stimulus is removed to increase the likelihood of a behavior.

The schedule or mode of reinforcement impacts how quickly operant conditioning may occur. An operant reinforcement schedule indicates which behaviors are to be reinforced and establishes rules to
Cooperative Learning
Cooperative learning is a successful teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each team member is responsible not only for learning what is taught, but also for helping teammates learn, creating an atmosphere of achievement (U.S. Department of Education 1992). Cooperative learning results in improved academic achievement, behavior, and attitudes towards school and student motivation (Gillies 2014; Roseth, Johnson, and Johnson 2008; Slavin 2013, 2014a, 2014b). Morgan (2012) noted that learners demonstrated greater retention of material, more on-task behavior, and higher levels of achievement with the use of cooperative learning in teaching children’s literature. School librarians who utilized The School Library Cooperative Learning Model noted:

- “There was improved transition time between activities and more focused learning overall with less time devoted to disciplinary issues.”
- “Problematic students were encouraged by their peers to appropriately participate in activities to help their teams earn points.”

The Model
This article, using a hierarchical approach, has the primary focus of providing a strategy for gaining/maintaining control of the school library learning environment via a cooperative learning structure. Once successful management has been achieved via the establishment of The School Library Cooperative Learning Model, the school librarian can then craft and refine cooperative learning activities to integrate with the model.

In my first year as an elementary school librarian, I was struggling with classroom management. I knew it was taking too much time for me to get learners settled upon entering the library and during transition between activities. Midway through that first year, I had the good fortune to attend a professional workshop on cooperative learning led by a school librarian and a staff development professional. Part of the workshop included the sharing of a video recording documenting the implementation of a cooperative learning structure using a team approach in a school library. It was the most impactful workshop in relation to my pedagogy that I have ever attended, and I subsequently utilized the model in my tenure as middle and high school librarian.

Model Core Components
Following the workshop, I went back to my school library and initiated a team-based approach to school library instruction based on what I had seen in the video with adaptations. After a bit of trial and error, The School Library Cooperative Learning Model evolved to consist of the following sequential components as illustrated in figure 1 and summarized below in table 1.

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**Table 1: The School Library Cooperative Learning Model Core Components**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Form Teams</th>
<th>II. Team Members Select Team Name</th>
<th>III. Introduce Model Guidelines to Students</th>
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<tr>
<td>IV. Initiate Model</td>
<td>V. Provide Fixed and Variable Ratio Reinforcement</td>
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Table 1. The School Library Cooperative Learning Model – Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1 – Form Teams</strong></td>
<td>Form teams and assign tables. For grades K-2, consider having the learners enter and be seated in a story time area; for grades 3-5, have the learners sit at an assigned table and designated seat; for middle and high school learners, collaborate with the classroom teacher to formulate teams with preassigned roles. Construction of the teams can support learning by distributing learners of varying abilities and talents at each table. The model provides an opportunity to separate learners who inhibit each other’s learning. If you are new to a school or unfamiliar with the learners, you can consult with the classroom teachers in the formulation of teams. You may also consider holding off on formulating teams until after you meet with each class enough times to effectively distribute learners of varying abilities and talents.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2 – Team Members</strong></td>
<td>Select Team Name Have each team work cooperatively to produce a team name. This serves as a team-building mechanism.</td>
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<td><strong>Step 3 – Introduce Model</strong></td>
<td>Introduce the model and reinforcement structure. For elementary learners, I designated specific times during each class period that teams of learners could be positively reinforced. Teams could earn one point per class session for each of the following: Entering the library and sitting in designated area appropriately (may be in story time designated area or at assigned tables). Working productively during instructional activities (e.g., story time, research, multimedia production). Helping clean up after an activity. Respecting others and materials during book selection. Exiting the library appropriately.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 4 – Initiate Model</strong></td>
<td>Create a display board to tally points for each class, listing each team name and team members. It is helpful to meet learners at library entrance for every class session to remind them of expectations and that they are earning a team point for entering appropriately. Consistency in implementation will contribute to implementation success.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 5 – Provide Fixed and Variable Ratio Reinforcement</strong></td>
<td>Track team points earned on the display board award. Once teams earn a designated number of points, they are positively reinforced with a reward (an example of fixed ratio reinforcement). For elementary learners, consider creating a treasure box of rewards. A local discount or dollar store typically has inexpensive trinkets and items appealing to elementary school learners. Middle and high school learners can often be motivated by the sheer power of competition. The School Library Cooperative Learning Model structure works well with learners of all ages in the implementation of educational gaming assessment tools. For example, a team-based Jeopardy assessment tool can be used to assess concepts such as literature genres, parts of a book, determining credible resources, and computer coding. Alternative scenarios: If one or more learners is acting out and keeping their team from earning points, you can then positively reinforce the other individuals on that team for appropriate behavior by awarding a special bonus — a sticker or other age-appropriate award (an example of variable ratio reinforcement). Conversely, if a whole team is not on task, you can take away a point from the board.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Cooperative learning activities will work best when the school librarian becomes proficient in creating activities that:

- **HAVE CLEAR GOALS.**
- **HAVE CLEAR ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS.**
- **ARE HIGHLY STRUCTURED.**
- **HAVE A CLEAR RATIONALE.**
- **ARE DESIGNED FOR ACTIVE LEARNER PARTICIPATION.**
- **ARE CHALLENGING.**
- **CELEBRATE DIVERSITY.**
- **ARE ACCOMMODATING OF VARIOUS GROUP SPEEDS (ILLINOIS 2023).**

The model can have additional dimensions like creating a competition among classes to see which class can earn the most points over a designated period (e.g., each quarter or semester). The winning class can be reinforced with a higher-tier reward (e.g., lunch in the library with “fun” activities or production time in a makerspace).

Once the School Library Cooperative Learning Model structure is in place, the school librarian can refine the implementation of cooperative learning activities. Assigning age-appropriate roles for activities like leader, recorder, reporter, timekeeper, checker, and materials manager supports collaboration and improved learning (Slavin 2013).

Cooperative learning activities will work best when the school librarian becomes proficient in creating activities that:

- have clear goals.
- have clear academic and behavioral expectations.
- are highly structured.
- have a clear rationale.
- are designed for active learner participation.
- are challenging.
- celebrate diversity.
- are accommodating of various group speeds (Illinois 2023).

**Successes and Challenges from the Field**

In my observations of school librarian practicum learners, I commonly see the use of a base-level cooperative learning approach in
Successful implementation of the more formal School Library Cooperative Learning requires the librarian to be adaptive, accepting of change, and willing to invest time in planning and the implementing model. Cooperative learning can serve as another pedagogical planning strategy in your teaching toolkit to design and implement team-based learning.

A sampling of school librarians who implemented the model shared their experiences via the following quotations:

- have clear goals.
- have clear academic and behavioral expectations.
- are highly structured.
- have a clear rationale.
- are designed for active learner participation.
- are challenging.
- celebrate diversity.
- are accommodating of various group speeds (Illinois 2023).

The following vignettes provide examples of successful implementation or adaptations of the model in K-12 schools:

**Elementary Level**

A school librarian with 14 years’ experience noticed that her traditional classroom management strategies were not being as effective as in prior years, particularly with select third grade learners. She noted that she only needed the adaptation of just placing the learners in teams and awarding the teams points for entering the library to improve the learning environment.

An elementary school librarian with 10 years’ experience used an adaptation of the model to create a game board (for each sports season). For example, in the fall, the librarian used a large magnetic whiteboard with a soccer field drawn on it; each team (learners selected their team’s name) was represented...
on the game board with a soccer ball magnet. The movement of the team’s magnet served as a reflection of team behavior. Each team’s weekly objective was to score a touchdown or a goal by the end of the class session.

I recently observed school librarians teaching coding. Using a team learning approach, the learners were assigned one of the following four rotational roles (designer, navigator, driver, and debugger) in developing code and executing the code for use in controlling robots). The learners achieved the learning objectives and gained proficiency in coding while building collaborative skills.

Secondary Level

The model can be utilized to facilitate teaching research or multimedia production with all secondary learners. By placing learners in research or production teams, the school librarian and collaborating classroom educators can identify individual talents and assign roles based on those talents. For example, a group of special needs seventh grade learners conducted research and produced a documentary video. The most proficient reader among the learners was the narrator, while those with technical aptitude served as videographers and editors.

At the high school level, a music classroom educator and school librarian collaborated on a project in which teams of four learners produced a music video. Using original music, the teams of learners had the jobs of writing, videotaping, and editing a two-minute music video. Learners rotated through the roles of writer, actor, videographer, and editor. They were presented with the scenario that they had been hired to produce a video. The scenario required they complete the project within a certain time frame and with a specified number of hours in editing/post-production to simulate a real-world experience. The learners enjoyed the project and the spirit of competition among teams sparked creative production.

Conclusion

The School Library Cooperative Learning Model presents a framework for the long-established effective concepts of team building and cooperative learning to improve school library instructional environments in the post-pandemic era. Implementation of the model can yield an improved learning climate, more learner time on task, fewer distractions from learning, improved learner achievement, a more mutually respectful learning environment, and resocialization of learners in the post-pandemic era. The time invested in setting up the model may be worth the dividends received.