

Leaders in high school collaborative problem-solving groups: Who are they and are they really needed for successful collaboration?

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Broadly speaking, collaborative problem solving (CPS) denotes a joint activity of a dyad or a small group which is directed toward performance or a desired goal state. CPS has been widely recognized as one of the essential 21st-century skills but is nevertheless rarely formally taught or modelled by educators. Thus, it seems that a more systematic approach for developing these skills, through regular curricula with appropriate support and scaffolding by teachers, is needed to produce positive effects on the achievement and social relations of students. The current study sought to investigate the common understanding of collaboration among highschoolers; current findings will serve as one of the inputs for the development of the PEER-model training of CPS that will help in overcoming potential misconceptions and building students' CPS skills at school. A total of 31 students (17 female) from six secondary schools in Belgrade were interviewed about experiences and attitudes relating to CPS. Several palpable misconceptions of collaboration emerged in students' answers through the results of thematic analysis. Firstly, students generally acknowledged that collaboration, which encompasses idea-sharing and argumentation, is an important life skill. Nevertheless, their description of collaboration shows that this process is too often equated with an efficient division of tasks among team members. Next, although the true nature of CPS is captured by the phrase "thinking together", students often accentuate the importance of organizational skills, capabilities, and knowledge of (in)formal group leaders. According to students, opposing views are a source of conflict that surely leads to failure, while "being on good terms" with other group members guarantees success. To follow, contrary to findings of extant research showing that teachers are indispensable in enhancing cognitive and group processes in CPS, students often marginalize the teacher's role in student collaboration by reducing it to instructional, organizational, and assessment tasks. Finally, some participants see CPS as appropriate only for younger children or as a tool for fixing grades and earning good marks. Our findings indicate that students' misconceptions of CPS could indeed pose barriers to successful collaboration, which is why any systematic attempt to train CPS skills in school needs to correct these first.

Keywords: collaborative problem solving, collaboration, misconceptions, high school students, training

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