



Exploring Life Orientation Teachers' Experiences Facilitating Active and Self-directed Learning in Cooperative Learning Classrooms

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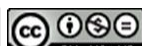
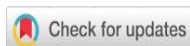
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ABSTRACT

Cooperative learning is a vital pedagogical method in teacher education, enabling teachers to facilitate active and self-directed learning in authentic contexts. This paper, exploring life orientation teachers' experiences facilitating active and self-directed learning in a cooperative learning classroom, followed a qualitative interpretive-phenomenological design. Through purposive sampling, seven participants were selected based on their experience in facilitating active and self-directed learning. Data were collected through interviews and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Cooperative learning emerged as a pivotal support strategy to enhance active and self-directed learning skills, facilitated by teachers who are crucial to promoting these skills and equipping learners with 21st-century life skills. Implementing active and self-directed learning practices through a cooperative learning approach should begin with teacher education. Therefore, policy and a skills-driven cooperative approach must be implemented to promote active and self-directed learning. Further research is needed, using a larger sample, which might yield different or more nuanced results in cooperative learning classrooms.



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INTRODUCTION

Cooperative learning (CL) has become a leading method for effective classroom instruction worldwide (Becirovic et al., 2022; Davidson, 2021; Teng, 2022). CL is a teaching approach that involves students collaborating in small groups to enhance their own learning and that of their peers. This strategy is not just about working together; it requires learners to depend on each other and work towards a shared goal (Johnson & Johnson, 2017). Life Orientation (LO), one of the fundamental school subjects in the South African school curriculum, offers excellent opportunities to develop the skills and competencies learners need to become effective citizens in a changing economy. CL is a prominent pedagogical method that can be applied across various platforms and learner groups, as well as in society at large. Weiss and Barth (2019) argue for quality education in schools, but the lack of educational programs impedes learners' development of the critical competencies required for sustainable development. This impediment can be easily overcome by creating authentic cooperative learning classroom environments (Rachmadyanti et al., 2025). Authentic learning environments provide a pleasant atmosphere in which teachers can demonstrate their self-directed learning (SDL) and active learning (AL) approaches. Additionally, learners are given opportunities to develop self-directed learning characteristics such as autonomy, independence, responsibility, critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and self-directedness (Dwijayanti et al., 2023; Jacobs & Renandya, 2019; Johnson & Johnson, 2017).



SDL is "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (Knowles, 1975, p. 18). Learners who are characterized as self-directed are guided by their ability to apply different learning strategies, are self-initiated inquirers, and work cooperatively as a team to reach their own learning goals. However, research indicates that teachers must incorporate innovative teaching and learning strategies in diverse environments to promote active learning where learners take responsibility for their own learning (du Plessis, 2025; du Toit-Brits, 2019).

Regarding active learning, there is no consensus on a universally accepted definition. According to Lombardi and Shipley (2021), active learning occurs between the teacher and the teaching activities, whereby the learners construct knowledge. Additionally, active learning allows learners to engage actively in structured learning activities such as group collaboration, self-direction, and advanced cognitive skills (Sekwena, 2023). CL has become central to the research hype that strongly advocates its use in classrooms (Baloche & Brody, 2017; Kaendler et al., 2019; van Leeuwen & Janssen, 2019). This promising strategy emphasizes collaboration and support among learners, fostering a diverse learning environment where learners can contribute meaningfully to the collective learning experience (Johnson & Johnson, 2019).

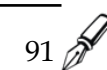
Teachers play a critical role in successfully implementing CL. Cañabate et al. (2021) view this as an essential step in fostering learning experiences and student engagement. CL allows teachers to support learners in developing problem-solving skills and again, recognized the responsibility of higher education institutions (HEIs) to ensure that teachers are equipped with innovative teaching and learning strategies such as CL (Chakyarkandiyil & Prakasha, 2023). CL, as an innovative teaching and learning approach, can be implemented across various spheres of education, including one that emphasizes the role of the teacher in the classroom (Abramczyk & Jurkowski, 2020; Baloche & Brody, 2017; Liebech-Lien & de Araújo, 2020).

Learner activities should be guided by clear, focused instructions when responding to tasks within a CL environment (Adeowu & Bakare, 2024). In pursuit of well-designed and effective teaching and learning methods for teachers, all stakeholders, such as learners, teaching staff, and educational officials, need to form part of this quest. Currently, the successful implementation of CL techniques is dependent on relevant, adequate teacher training programs. Petro (2022) argues that thorough teacher preparation has become an important way to encourage a collaborative teacher-learner learning environment. Importantly, the global economy has required a shift in the modern workforce's mindset regarding skills requirements (World Economic Forum, 2020). In sum, CL practices in educational activities present a promising avenue for enhancing educational outcomes. As workplace demands evolve, integrating a collaborative, cooperative approach seems necessary to prepare students for future success and positively motivate them (Gitadewi et al., 2022).

The term 'life orientation' is not prominent in the global arena but is known as 'life skills.' The World Health Organization (WHO) (1994) defined life skills as the following:

"a group of psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others, and cope with and manage their lives healthily and productively. Life skills may be directed toward personal actions or actions toward others, as well as toward actions to change the surrounding environment to make it conducive to health." p. 1

In a South African context, LO/Life Skills prepares students to engage effectively at the personal, psychological, cognitive, motor, physical, moral, spiritual, cultural, and socio-economic levels. This fundamental skills-based approach emphasizes the diverse needs of learners within a holistic development framework, promoting social, physical, and recreational growth (DBE, 2011).



The cooperative learning theory also serves as a model for life orientation and is based on critical-active pedagogy. Additionally, this model empowers learners to engage with their communities, enabling them to create and reshape knowledge within and beyond the classroom (Toklucu & Tay, 2016). Additionally, learners become motivated and achieve personal goals within these learning communities and subsequently show respect for diverse beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge. Another personal attribute is the development of a critical awareness mindset and social skills, which help learners be flexible in their expression and contribute actively to this community of learning (Mahmudah et al., 2023). Subsequently, motivation, personal achievement, respect for others, and values are important competencies to be acquired. In this context, the researcher argues that there is little evidence on how LO teachers facilitate active, self-directed learning in a CL context (Seherrie, 2020).

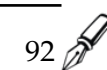
Statement of the Problem

In South African schools, traditional classroom learning tends to be the norm. Learners lack the enthusiasm and rigor to participate and take responsibility for their learning, lack motivation to learn, or do not possess adequate self-directed learning skills (Department of Basic Education (DBE), South Africa, 2021). It is often referred to as 'academic boredom' as a silent aspect of achievement emotion that is negatively associated with optimal learning in formal educational settings (Acee et al., 2010). Today's students tend not to actively participate in classroom activities, making it difficult for teachers to implement active teaching and learning approaches. Active teaching and learning strategies have a positive impact on lecturers' presence and engagement and on students' acquisition of positive attitudes toward the subject being taught (Han, 2021). Westphal et al. (2018) describe boredom as "a negative, unpleasant achievement-related emotion" that constitutes one of the largest pitfalls in academic learning. Furthermore, learners who are bored do not invest enough time and effort in their schoolwork and lack the ability to manage their studies with less emotion (Schwartz et al., 2020).

A study by Hendrickson (2021) concluded that learners' enthusiasm for learning can lead to better class attendance and performance, thereby increasing learning opportunities. Additionally, active learning techniques aid student learning by sharpening students' analytical, oral communication, and writing skills through a variety of assignments; they broaden and deepen students' knowledge and understanding and help them become conversant on certain issues. Regarding the latter, it is not only vital for learners to acquire subject knowledge in school subjects but also to develop critical skills and take responsibility for their learning (Kan'an & Osman, 2015). Therefore, teachers take on the role of supporting and assisting learners (UNESCO, 2017). Depending on the level of the classroom activities, the learners will experience different emotions, ranging from pleasure and curiosity to anxiety and boredom (Lichtenfeld et al., 2023).

CL is an effective teaching and learning approach that enhances active learning among learners under favorable conditions in a self-directed learning environment. Therefore, teachers' responsibility is to create an environment that not only increases learner motivation but also encourages students to engage independently in learning (du Toit-Brits, 2019). Thus, learners will respond positively to teachers' enthusiasm, competence, and commitment to self-directed learning in the teaching and learning process. CL allows group members to connect with one another, thereby developing important skills such as critical thinking, self-control, collaboration, effective communication, and confidence (Hiemstra, 2013; Mentz & Van Zyl, 2016).

This study offers clear novelty by focusing on life orientation teachers' experiences facilitating active and self-directed learning in cooperative learning classrooms. Importantly, SDL, as a learning approach, motivates learners to demonstrate autonomy and confront the barriers of traditional instruction (Tularam & Machisella, 2018). Consequently, the commonalities and differences among CL, AL, and SDL have sparked interest in this study. Its originality is foregrounded in the phenomenology of meaningful learning experiences through the social cognitive theory and the social interdependence theory within the constructivist-interpretive



framework. Additionally, this research demonstrates complex novelty by simultaneously connecting multiple conceptual frameworks.

Therefore, to achieve this objective, the following research questions were formulated:

- SRQ1: What is the role of LO teachers during CL?
- SRQ2: How do LO teachers facilitate active and self-directed learning in a CL environment?

Theoretical Framework

This study will use social cognitive theory (SCT) and social interdependence theory (SIT; Johnson & Johnson, 2009) as its theoretical lens. The SCT forms an integral part of constructivist learning and postulates that learning occurs in a social, cooperative learning context with reciprocal interaction among the learner, the environment, and behavior. This engagement, participation, and collaboration foster self-directed learning in an environment (Vygotsky, 1978). SIT, a significant background theory of collaborative learning, establishes a sense of social interdependence when participants' outcomes depend on their own actions and those of others (Johnson & Johnson, 2017). SIT is based on three components: (1) outcome, which refers to goals and rewards; (2) means, which are the resources, roles, and tasks; and (3) boundary, which refers to consensus where learners reach a mutual agreement regarding the assigning of tasks and their respective roles in the group (Johnson & Johnson, 2017; Van Wyk, 2016). Consequently, all group members become aware of their interrelated responsibility for the common learning objectives within the cooperative learning environment. Furthermore, groups will work independently but as a unified whole (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). With a high level of positive interdependence and cooperative interaction, teachers can create a learning environment that supports successful collaborative learning among students, takes ownership of learning, and improves interpersonal relationships and their sense of belonging (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). When the principles and elements of cooperative learning are incorporated and applied correctly, they can enhance social cohesion, foster the development of social skills, and improve students' academic performance (Riisla et al., 2021).

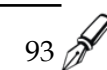
The Role of LO Teachers in CL

CL is an active, learner-centered approach in which learners work in small, heterogeneous groups, share ideas, and work towards a common goal (Johnson & Johnson, 2014). Through their interaction and the emergence of opportunities, students tend to participate, debate, present their ideas, take on responsibilities, and engage in collaborative problem-solving, which promotes important life skills (Cramer et al., 2022; Ferguson-Patrick & Jolliffe, 2018). Secondary and higher education institutions should strengthen educational policy requirements to include 21st-century skills such as communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking in their curricula (Liebech-Lien & de Araújo, 2020) so that students are able to manage the challenges and problems of future knowledge economies (Keramati & Gillies, 2024).

The intention of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) was to transition from a content-driven curriculum to a skills-based curriculum that enables learners to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes to think critically, evaluate information, and take ownership of their decision-making (DBE, 2011). It has thus become necessary for LO teachers to have a broad repertoire of teaching approaches, such as CL. Poor mastery of LO content knowledge and weak competence in demonstrating skills, attitudes, and values are a concern (Rachmadyanti et al., 2025; Zulu, 2016).

A Cooperative Learning Environment to Encourage Self-directedness

A learning environment is an important setting where experiences and expectations are shared, perceptions are challenged, and students seek alternatives to resolve problems (Rusticus et al., 2020). Keramati and Gillies (2022) argue that CL fosters a positive learning environment that enhances students' engagement in learning and life skills. This engagement takes place in a



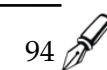
physical setting with various cultural and administrative norms. Reflecting on learners' learning styles makes it easier for teachers to recognize diverse learning styles. In so doing, Adeowu and Bakare (2024) suggest that teachers adapt their teaching approaches to accommodate these learning styles in diverse classroom settings. Therefore, teachers must be able to apply a variety of teaching methods and have a sense of learners' needs, abilities, and capabilities to effectively enhance learners' self-directedness. To further this argument, self-directed learning, motivation, and learning achievement can be linked during curriculum instruction. Another element of self-directedness is positive emotions from learners that can improve time management, preparation for tests, achievement, and positive feelings and can also promote autonomous learning ability and self-efficacy (Meena, 2020).

SDL, an important 21st-century skill (Brandt, 2020), can be developed through cooperative learning, where effective communication is vital to building strong relationships with group members (Syamsuddin, 2021). Students' collaboration and discussion enhance learning, rather than receiving information from their instructors (Lee et al., 2018). Lam (2015) posits that the overall effectiveness of teamwork depends on cooperative communication. This communication and collaboration encourage students to build positive, supportive relationships in which they learn to respond to different opinions and arguments and to manage conflict that may arise (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). Learners thus take ownership of their learning, engage in various activities, collaborate with their peers, and are responsible for self-monitoring their learning. Problem-based and cooperative learning strategies motivate learners to take responsibility for their learning, thereby enhancing self-directed learning. Conducive learning contexts that are favorable for SDL prepare learners for their working careers and enable them to be compatible as lifelong learners (Morris, 2019).

Promoting Cooperative Skills to Develop Active Learners

CL, which promotes learners' interactions (Johnson & Johnson, 2018), is the basis for active learning in a cooperative classroom. Learners actively participate as members of the group to ensure the group's success. Since CL is a structured learning process, the role of teachers is essential to prepare learners for this cooperative group work (Topping et al., 2017). CL is structured and guided by two key directives, positive interdependence and individual accountability. Positive interdependence is goal-oriented, with learners working toward a common goal. Individual accountability refers to each group member's responsibility and how they will contribute to the group. Teachers can train learners to elaborate on one another's ideas, practice communication, and support learners' skills (Baran et al., 2021; Völlinger et al., 2018). This process provides an active learning experience, encourages deeper learning, and aids in critical thinking and understanding. Active learning models are common in the literature. Hodges (2020) mentions that student-centered active learning environments, such as 'Technology-enabled active learning,' 'Spaces to transform,' 'Interact,' and 'Engage,' are among the popular models of active learning. During this process, students are actively participating in discussions, experiments, and hands-on projects. In Sekwena's (2023) view, learners take the initiative in their learning and promote critical thinking skills, which lead to greater success. The most important key to active learning is increasing student engagement [participation].

Active learning can take many forms and positively influence various aspects of learning, including the development of reflective, autonomous, independent, critical thinking, problem-solving, and goal-oriented skills (Fauziah et al., 2020; Laar et al., 2020). Hendrickson (2021) asserts that, since active learning techniques can improve the quality of students' learning, students' feelings about their own ability to succeed can also improve. Furthermore, learners do well in a subject, which may also make them more engaged because they feel that they will be rewarded for their efforts and energy. The ability to engage students in new learning activities highlights one benefit of active learning: learners are exposed to new opportunities to participate in the learning process. Andrews et al. (2020) found that learners appreciate their learning activities, are



not interested in distracting others, but often evaluate their courses and instructors. Lugosi and Uribe (2020) list active learning strategies, such as group problem-solving, applying and connecting required knowledge, continuous encouragement, motivation, and feedback, which increase students' interest in specific topics and result in better achievement. The scholars conclude that these strategies prepare students to overcome professional challenges and become respectful citizens. Tharayil et al. (2018) confirm that active learning strategies are more effective than traditional lectures in promoting educational outcomes and that, with appropriate interventions, instructors can mitigate students' resistance to active learning. Active learning strongly emphasizes learner autonomy and proactivity, while CL centers on collaboration and interaction among learners. Against this conceptual and theoretical framework, the research methodology guiding this study is discussed below.

RESEARCH METHOD

This section discusses the research design and methodology adopted in this study, as well as the sampling, data collection, and data analysis methods.

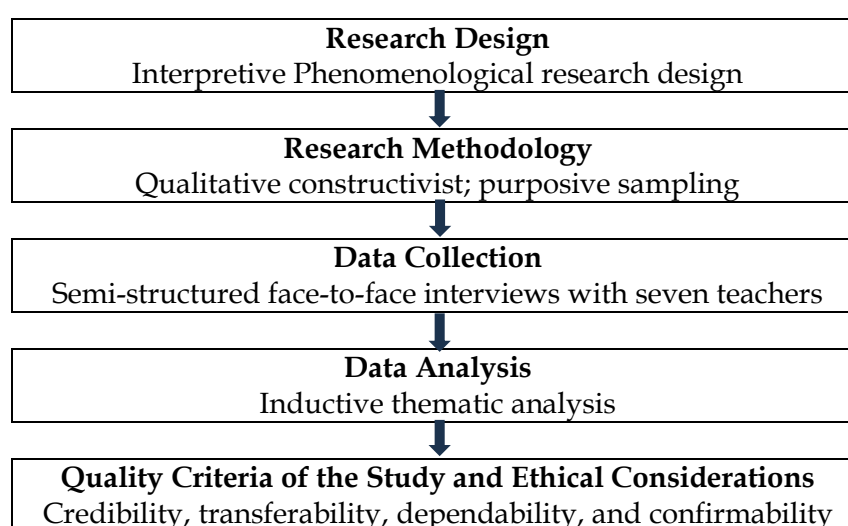
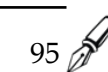


Figure 1. Research flow chart

Research Design

In this qualitative study, a phenomenological research design was used to understand how LO teachers facilitate active and SDL in a CL classroom. This approach is appropriate because it explores phenomena beyond the surface and helps the researcher generate data from participants in context (Giorgi, 2021). The rationale for using an interpretative phenomenological research design was to get as close as possible to the experience, its real-life context, the personal meaning, and the emotional lived experiences of LO teachers as they relate to the problem, which allows the researchers to conduct a detailed analysis of the participants' interpretations and understandings of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2017). This ensured that the researcher's interpretations were fully grounded in the data. Clarity-seeking and meaning-making are essential for understanding the LO teachers' experiences in CL classrooms. Holmes et al. (2022) argue that the learning environment in which knowledge is constructed is important for interpreting participants' lived experiences. Furthermore, Neubauer et al. (2019) postulate that the phenomenological approach enables the researcher to have a reflexive interpretation of the participants' experiences in the school setting. This study employed inductive analogical reasoning to achieve a more general understanding of the phenomenon.



Research Site

The research site is the location where the researcher will collect data from the phenomenon under investigation. The Northern Cape is divided into five districts, namely Frances Baard, John Taolo Gaetsewe, Namaqua, ZF Mgcawe, and Pixley Ka Seme. The researcher is located in Pixley Ka Seme, the selection site of the participants, with 25 secondary schools. Figure 2 below shows the location of all the Department of Education districts in the Northern Cape Province, South Africa.



Figure 2: Department of education districts in the Northern Cape, South Africa
(www.municipalities.co.za/demographic/137/pixley-ka-seme-district-municipality)

Sampling

This research used purpose-based sampling to select seven Grade 10 LO teachers from secondary schools in the Pixley Ka Seme District, Northern Cape, South Africa. Purposive sampling of LO teachers (three male and four female) would provide an in-depth understanding of their experiences, expertise, and knowledge related to the study's central issues (Nieuwenhuis, 2014). Participants were aged between 24 and 50. Most participants had been teaching LO since the implementation of CAPS in 2011. One teacher had a year of experience, two teachers had between eight and ten years, and four had more than ten years of teaching experience in Grades 10 to 12.

Table 1. Biographical data of participants

Name and School	Position	Gender group	Age	Teaching Experience	Highest qualification
Verti	A	Teacher	F	23	BEd
Umzi	B	DH	F	21	BEd Honours
Carn	C	Teacher	F	10	BEd
Pet	D	DH	F	20	BEd
JP	E	Teacher	M	8	ACE
Ches	F	DH	M	21	BEd
Rich	G	Teacher	M	1	BSC

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted for three months. Thirty- to forty-five-minute interviews were scheduled. Since LO has only two lesson periods during a school week, interviews were conducted once every two weeks, as one period is allocated to physical education and the other to teaching and learning. This happened after school hours in the deputy principal's office. This scheduling enabled the researcher to conduct interviews with all teachers. Before each interview session, participants were informed of confidentiality and anonymity and that they could withdraw if they felt uncomfortable during the interview. An interview schedule with open-ended questions was used to determine the LO teachers' teaching praxis and their facilitation of active, self-directed learning in a cooperative classroom (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Some of the interview questions were as follows: (1) What was your role when you implemented the group investigation as a cooperative learning approach? (2) Elaborate on the teaching methods that you have applied during your lesson presentation. (3) Cooperative learning is a skills-driven approach. What were your observations of the skills learners possessed before you started cooperative learning and after?

Data Analysis

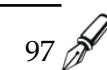
This study employed thematic analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze the data. An inductive method was followed, with categories and subcategories emerging as the data were analyzed to uncover rich insights and interpretations. The thematic analysis was conducted manually by two expert researchers with extensive research experience (10 years or more) in the field to identify specific themes and sub-themes from the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Steps were followed for the thematic analysis process, such as familiarizing oneself with the data. Secondly, specific codes were allocated to establish themes linked to participants' extracts. After discussing and reflecting on all themes, new themes are defined. Lastly, the researchers create an extensive document that connects chosen themes, study findings, and their relevance to practice.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is crucial to establishing the credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of qualitative findings. To ensure credibility, the data generated from the face-to-face interviews were recorded and manually transcribed. The transcribed interviews were returned to all participants for verification of satisfaction. Confirmability was achieved by allowing participants to verify whether they were able to confirm that the transcriptions were true (reality) of what they had said. Dependability was maintained through a detailed description of the documentation of participants' experiences, which was presented and analyzed. Additionally, an audit trail was created, in which the researchers maintained a record of all decisions made during the research process. Transferability was achieved through comprehensive and detailed explanations of the research process (thick description of the data) to enable readers to transfer the findings to their own truths and perspectives (Ahmed, 2024; Nowell et al., 2017). This methodological process provided complete insight into teachers' views on facilitating activeness and SDL in cooperative classrooms.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the university's College of Education Ethics Review Committee (reference number 2019/11/13/41003276/08/AM) in South Africa, and the ethics committee's protocol was followed. Permission to conduct the research in schools was obtained from the Department of Education. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The presentation of the findings is based on the praxis of the seven secondary school teachers at particular secondary schools in South Africa. The purpose is to gather information on the outcomes of teachers' experiences facilitating active, self-directed learning in cooperative classrooms. Participants' anonymity is protected using pseudonyms. Three themes emerged from the study findings. The data are presented below:

Theme 1: The Role of the Teacher in a Cooperative Learning Classroom

Sub-theme 1.1: The Teacher and Learner Cooperative Interaction

Participants explained the teaching and learning process. During the interaction of questioning between the teacher and the learner, learning was facilitated:

"When learners do not understand, I approach the group to discuss or have to explain again to the whole class." Verti

"When I ask questions, I make sure that everyone listens so that I can ask anyone to respond." Rick.

"Learners tend to dominate the rest of the group members by asking questions alone instead of giving opportunities to other members. When I notice that, I talk about group dominance so that it never happens again." Umzi

The interaction between the teacher and the learner demonstrated an important element of cooperative learning. Teachers have reported that learners do not understand; therefore, they adapt their teaching approaches and strategies. The participants also expressed challenges with learner dominance in the groups. The extracts above demonstrate that teacher-facilitated interactions foster positive classroom relationships and support effective learning.

Sub-theme 1.2: Employ Different Teaching Approaches [Investigative, Individualization, Question-And-Answer Method, Lecture Method/Teacher-Centered Approach]

Participants reported using a variety of teaching approaches. These teaching approaches vary from traditional teacher-centered approaches to learner-centered ones. The participants highlighted that learners found these approaches approachable and relatable, leading them to be more open and eager. They confirmed that they applied the investigative approach, group discussions, questioning, and sometimes lecturing as a method:

"Learners must investigate matters and draw their own conclusions [investigative approach]. They discover what they want to know, and we, as teachers, can just guide them." Ches.

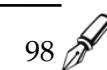
"I allow them to have insight discussions in their groups [group discussions] and then they must do some proposals and recommendations on certain topics," Pet.

"...when learners do not understand, I approach the individual [Individualization] or group to discuss or re-explain. When I realize it is the whole class, I address the whole class [whole class approach]." Verti

".... When I ask questions, I make sure that all learners are listening so that I can ask anyone to respond [question-and-answer method]" Umzi

From the above quotations, it is evident that teachers played an influential role in facilitating the lesson. There is collaboration among all members as they work together to solve problems. Although groups are involved in relevant activities, teachers must monitor learners' engagement. Positive interdependence, as an important element of CL, comes to the fore when group members have the opportunity to share their contributions. Despite innovative teaching methods, some participants used traditional teaching methods:

"... sometimes good to apply the old way of teaching, because learners will learn by sitting and listening at their desks for the rest of the period [lecture method/teacher-centred approach] ..." Verti.



"When time is against me, I write the content on the chalkboard, and the learners copy it. Explanation will be made later on. This helps in saving time [teacher-centred approach]" Rich

The above quotes show that teachers, at times, use traditional teaching methods to summarize lessons and ensure that learners understand the subject content, which would assist with subsequent lessons. Participants stated that time was also a factor, and they had to be mindful when they were teaching. They mentioned that they used the teacher-centered approach to win time and to finish the content taught. However, they were not entirely opposed to traditional teaching approaches, depending on the context.

Theme 2: A conducive Learning Environment Enhances Active Participation

Sub-theme 2.1: Secure and Safe Environment

The research also revealed that learners participate freely and eagerly within their groups, enjoy freedom of expression, and have equal opportunity to participate in the classroom. These qualities were observed when learners were not restricted from moving around and sharing their thoughts openly. It is indicative that a positive environment is not only about physical context; the emotional environment is also important. This is an illustration of an environment conducive to learning, as indicated below:

"Learners do not want to take breaks during intervals and feel it is the best place to complete their exercises on their own and in their own time... Learners discuss in groups and just want to present their work. Whether it is wrong or right, they appear positive." Carn

"Sharing facts and participating openly in discussions. They enjoy each other and speak out freely, waiting for the group leader to guide them." Pet

"There is idea-sharing, which can lead to new ideas coming out. This is positive as it will assist the group members. Learners' opinions were a spark for others, which opened alternative ideas ..." JP

The quotes indicate that learners were eager to work in groups, discussing and interacting, under the guidance of the group leader. This safe, secure environment fostered an open, free-spirited learning environment and demonstrated the students' commitment to completing the tasks and presenting their findings. This simply means that teachers should encourage and work towards creating environments where learners can interact without fear.

Sub-theme 2.2: Group Cohesiveness and Valuable Moments

Group cohesion relates to the previous theme of learner participation and taking responsibility in groups. Cohesion is the tendency of a group to remain united, forge social bonds, and share ideals in the pursuit of objectives. The use of cooperative learning almost always improves affective outcomes. Learners love working in groups and feel more successful when they work cooperatively. They have more friends and are more accepting of others who are different from themselves. Importantly, groups must work toward a common goal to earn a reward or recognition, and the group's success must depend on each group member learning. Participants expressed the following:

"Learners are actively involved and connect very well in the groups." Pet

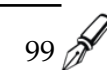
"Learners are focused, but relaxed and enjoyable." Carn

"They behave like old friends and do not want to leave the others behind. Members are close to each other and appear to participate well." JP

"Most of the learners tolerate each other and have respect and understanding for each other."

Verti

From the abovementioned findings, it can be deduced that within each group, learners understand that as there is a task to complete, they need to participate and take responsibility in the group. On a social level, learners begin to trust and respect each other, working together for the good of the group. It is evident that two elements of cooperative learning are effective: group goals and individual accountability through social cohesion.



Theme 3: Development of 21st-Century Skills

Sub-theme 3.1: Communication

Participants highlighted communication as an important 21st-century skill, as presented in the data. Findings revealed that learners did not find it difficult to communicate with each other by exchanging information that contributed to achieving a desired goal. Learners demonstrated they could communicate in multiple ways, both verbally and non-verbally. They communicated well with each other and within their groups during lessons and group work.

"Learners were able to communicate with each other based on the information and knowledge they've acquired while doing the research." Verti

Communication works best. I encourage learners to participate in class discussions. They [...] you could see the facial expressions: ...surprised and others nod their heads." Pet

LO teachers, realizing the need to assist learners in developing critical 21st-century skills, created an environment conducive to learning that provided a safe space where learners could interact and engage freely and, through discussion and debate, address issues and construct knowledge. Teaching learners to communicate efficiently and effectively across all new modalities of information exchange is an important challenge for all pedagogical institutions.

Sub-theme 3.2: Problem-solving

Creative problem-solving emphasizes understanding problems from multiple perspectives, generating a wide range of potential solutions, and fostering a supportive environment for creativity. Participants mentioned another 21st-century skill: *problem-solving*. Teachers noted that teaching approaches must help learners develop problem-solving skills and promote creativity and innovation in the classroom. As an example, participants said:

"Solving problems is enhanced and strengthened as more learners find a solution. Learners brainstorming ideas, argue for some time on problems, but reach a consensus on how to clarify them." JP

"Members could argue rationally, and they have never stopped looking for a solution [perseverance] to solve problems. When they are uncertain, they call the teacher to explain to the group of only one or two learners in the group." Carn

Problem-solving is an essential 21st-century skill that learners need to acquire, enabling them to work through a problem systematically, collaborating with their peers to reach an understanding and/or a solution. Literature emphasizes the importance of divergent thinking, which involves generating many unique ideas. Learners were given the opportunity, in their teams, to evaluate potential solutions through brainstorming, discussion, and clarification. This is indicative of convergent thinking, in which learners narrow down to select the most feasible and effective solutions.

Discussion

This study sought to determine the role of LO teachers in CL. Data revealed that despite skepticism of the positive effects of CL, teachers play a crucial role in implementing CL, establishing interaction between teachers and learners on the one hand and learners among themselves on the other, knowing that the gains are much higher for students as they learn to solve problems and collaborate effectively in groups (Abramczyk & Jurkowski, 2020). Baloch and Brody (2017) are of the view that CL has become a non-negotiable and advocate its use in CL classrooms. Cramer et al. (2021) contend that promoting CL strategies provides a platform for students to engage in dialogue, share viewpoints, collectively construct meaning, and enrich their knowledge of subject content. In CL, the teacher is characterized as a facilitator who monitors and guides students.

It is important for the teacher, as the facilitator, to provide explicit, detailed instructions and guidelines, explain the outcomes, and model cooperative behaviors to ensure successful implementation (Johnson & Johnson, 2017). Students need to understand the teacher's

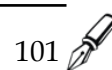
instructions, as unclear instructions can lead to confusion and affect the success of cooperative tasks (Adeowu & Bakara, 2024). Petro (2022) asserts that teachers are the most important element in the teaching chain, as they must be well prepared. When teachers' instructions are clear and understandable, students will do what is expected of them.

Findings revealed that domination was a challenge for some group members. Therefore, the teacher, who monitors the groups in action, should intervene to mitigate such situations. These tendencies allow for unequal participation in groups, and some group members prefer to contribute less (Lichtenfeld et al., 2023). By implication, when some CL groups are inadequately monitored and supervised, students can dominate discussions or tasks, aligning with Moges (2019), who concurs that unequal participation can be a stumbling block to the effectiveness of CL, which may result from differences in students' confidence levels.

It emerged that teachers use various teaching approaches. Some teachers apply innovative teaching strategies that involve students in interaction, discussion, investigation, and group activities, which promote active learner participation in the learning process, foster positive attitudes, encourage learners' participation, and ultimately develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Hodges, 2020). Learners who are part of knowledge construction are regarded as contributors to the learning process (Lee et al., 2018). Some teachers use traditional classroom teaching methods where students sit at their desks and the teacher, as an authoritarian, disseminates the content (Baloche & Brody, 2017). Consequently, learners copy information from the chalkboard, and the teacher explains the content, as indicated by Mahaye (2021). This study advocates that teachers facilitate a process in which learners become involved and take ownership of their learning.

The findings indicate that learners benefit from conducive learning environments that enhance active participation and offer a safe, secure space. Keramati and Gillies (2024) note that CL creates safe, secure environments and provides equal support and opportunities for student participation in the LO classroom. It is in these safe spaces that learners connect with other group members and learn from each other, which offers potentially social and affective benefits and in which they build more positive and supportive relationships that help improve the sense of belonging (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). Active teaching strategies increase engagement and student acquisition of positive attitudes toward the subject (Han, 2021). What can be deduced is that learners who feel safe and free are likely to participate openly and contribute actively to the construction of new knowledge. Hiemstra (2013) argues that connecting with peers and working together in a group can help learners develop confidence. Learners tend to develop a good understanding, take pride in their work, are committed, and show trust in each other, strengthening the interconnection between group members. Riisla et al. (2021) substantiate this finding by alluding to the fact that social cohesion is the ability to tolerate and respect individual feelings and opinions. Bekker et al. (2023) supported his assertion and noted that pleasant engagement at school contributes to better classroom participation and scholastic achievement, which can counter learners who lack enthusiasm and rigor in their learning. Furthermore, Hendrickson (2021) concludes that enthusiasm is a stepping stone to active learning, which can lead to improved learning opportunities in which they take responsibility for their learning. In addition, social cohesion and learners' engagement in a safe space significantly improve communication quality and positively influence task performance (Lam, 2015; Riisla et al., 2021).

The findings show that learners who demonstrate positive attitudes toward learning also contribute to student SDL skills, improved social skills, and interpersonal interaction, which is related to being a self-directed learner (Mentz & Van Zyl, 2016). CL classrooms effectively develop a positive attitude towards learning, improve social and interpersonal skills, and improve academic performance (Buchs & Butera, 2015; Mentz & Van Zyl, 2016). However, this finding aligns with Mentz and Van Zyl (2016), who posit that learners involved in shared decision-making, problem-solving, and communication assume greater responsibility for making the classroom a good place to be and to learn. This type of environment was created by the LO



teachers' strategy. Tularam and Machisella (2018) concur with Mentz and Van Zyl (2016) about SDL skills and maintain that embracing SDL culture empowers learners to take control of their education and be productive and independent. These qualities relate to autonomous, independent, and self-initiated learners, which describe self-directedness. Therefore, learners take responsibility for their learning and goal-setting. In sum, Syamsuddin (2021) argues that learners learned to communicate and trust one another, which created an environment conducive to positive, successful group contributions.

CONCLUSION

This study explored life orientation teachers' experiences facilitating active and self-directed learning in cooperative classrooms. The findings revealed that during the facilitation of active and SDL in cooperative learning classrooms, teachers play an important role. Teachers felt that learner-centered approaches are important and effective to ensure that students actively engage in learning activities. While learner participation and engagement are key elements in instructional activities, the gains in acquiring essential 21st-century skills are much higher in learner-centered approaches. Furthermore, the literature indicated that traditional teaching methods can still be applied, depending on the teaching and learning context. Safe and supportive learning environments also allow learners to participate eagerly in activities, helping them achieve their learning goals. Such approaches are likely to foster a sense of ownership among teachers, promoting conducive learning environments to enhance the skills of the 21st century. These skills are vital in producing engaged citizens who contribute effectively to a knowledge-based economy.

The first recommendation of this research concerns the training of LO teachers in active and self-directed learning. SDL is an unfamiliar concept to secondary school teachers, leaving a considerable gap when learners enter higher learning institutions. Teacher training is essential for developing specialized knowledge of self-directed learning, equipping learners with the tools needed in their learning environments. Secondly, it is about policy implementation. As education evolves, positive interdependence and individual accountability, as important elements of CL, reaffirm the efficacy of innovative learning environments for implementing and incorporating CL into policy. Learners need to be equipped with these skills and attitudes to independently manage their learning in institutions of higher learning. More research is needed with a larger sample to compare cooperative teaching approaches across various classroom settings. This research should inform policymakers, training institutions, and service providers on structured professional development opportunities for LO teachers.

Several limitations emerged: the study was conducted in one of five districts in a particular province in South Africa, among 25 secondary schools. The vast distances between the towns have made it difficult to visit the teachers on time. The main limitation of the study is its small sample size. Since this study included only seven teachers in the district, the results cannot be generalized and should be interpreted with caution. On a national and global scale, more research is needed to examine the impact of facilitating active, self-directed learning in cooperative learning classrooms in other schools.

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