Who's The Boss?

How the seating arrangement of dominant leaders affects

the roles other students take on during cooperative

learning activities

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

<u>Description of my teaching context:</u>

In my classroom, there are twenty-two students that can generally be classified into three personality types. These personalities can be described as dominant leaders, quiet leaders, and non-leaders. The dominant leader is a student that always participates in group discussion, but often does not listen to the other members of his or her own group. The dominant leader often tries to correct a student when he or she believes that student is incorrect or does not like the idea. He or she may try to control the cooperative learning activity in order for it to run the way he or she thinks it should be run. For example, a dominant leader may give out roles to the students in the group or tell students what he or she thinks may be the correct answer or best idea, without allowing the other students to try it out on their own or express ideas. The student classified as a quiet leader has the ability and potential to take on leadership roles. For the most part, this type of student always remains on task, always completes assignments accurately and correctly, and participates in group discussions. However, the quiet leader rarely speaks against the thoughts or ideas of the other members of his or her group. He or she allows the other students to share their ideas, and if that student may be wrong, the quiet leader often does not correct the student. Instead, the quiet leader would continue to believe or think what he or she originally believed or thought, without speaking against his or her peer. The student classified as a

non-leader is one who never takes on the leader role in a cooperative learning activity. These students usually sit quietly, may have difficulty remaining on task, and offer little to no support to his or her cooperative learning group. These students rarely participate in a group discussion and allow the other members of the group to complete the assignment for them.

<u>What led me to this particular inquiry and why it is important:</u>

I was led to this particular inquiry because there are at least three students that stuck out in my mind as having dominant personalities in my classroom. I was interested in analyzing how these students acted and performed within a cooperative learning group setting. I enjoyed watching how these students interacted with the other children in the class. Although I observed my students carefully, I knew that I was not able to see or hear everything that occurred during a cooperative group activity. I began to observe that when the students in my classroom were working on a cooperative learning activity, those students with the dominant personalities were often taking over the assignment and not allowing the other students of the class to participate as much as they may have wanted to. I started to notice this trend in my classroom and wondered how the students with dominate personalities were affecting the roles other students in the classroom took on while working in a cooperative learning group. It is important to understand how the personalities of students within a classroom setting may affect the other students in the classroom because a teacher wants his or her students to be as successful as possible. I believe that every student should have the opportunity

to express his or her thoughts and ideas and contribute to a group activity. When a particular personality of one child in the classroom is negatively affecting the performance of another child, there becomes a problem. As a teacher, I want to fix this problem to ensure that each child in the classroom is working to his or her best ability and has the opportunity to share his or her thoughts and ideas.

<u>What others think/ know about this topic:</u>

Although I had difficulty discovering research materials on my exact topic of inquiry, I was able to break down my research into more general topics. Some of these topics included seating arrangements, classroom organization, and student leaders in elementary classrooms.

In a 1987 article, Casburn discusses a study conducted by Rosenfield, Lambert, and Black that was based on student achievement in the classroom. "According to the study by Rosenfield, Lambert, and Black (1985), low achievers demonstrated more withdrawal, and engaged in listening and on-task behavior less frequently. Rosenfield, Lambert, and Black also state that it was the student desk arrangement that had significant results on the student on-task behavior not just the ability level of the child." I agree that the achievement level of a child is affected depending on the seating arrangement in my classroom. I believe that the success of a child in my classroom is affected by which students the child is sitting or working with in a cooperative learning group. I noticed that when non-leaders worked with dominant

leaders, the non-leaders were not as successful as when they worked with the quiet leaders in the classroom. The desk arrangement of the non-leaders may be the cause of their lack of success. The non-leaders may be negatively affected when they sit and work with the dominant leaders.

In the same article, Casburn explains a study of classroom organization conducted by Zifferblatt. "Zifferblatt (1972) found that large cluster arrangements facilitate social interaction but impede individual work." I agree that when students work within a cooperative learning group, some students in the group tend to do the work for the other students in the group. Thus, individual work is not required as the students in the cooperative learning group can rely on others to do the work for them. In my classroom, I began to notice that the dominant leaders would complete the task or do the work for the non-leaders in their cooperative learning group.

In 2001, Patton performed a speech at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of School Psychologists in Washington D.C. Patton discussed the topic of classroom arrangement and seating designs. "We found that small group 'cluster' designs were now used pervasively apparently because many contemporary teachers believe that this type of seating arrangement contributes directly to students' educational growth through the effects of socially facilitated learning." I believe that students learn and grow from social interactions with one another. I agree that it is essential for students in a classroom to be exposed to positive social interaction to ensure positive learning experiences. Children have the potential to gain confidence

and self-esteem through interactions with their peers. It is the job of the teacher to find the seating arrangement that enables most, if not all, students in the classroom to be successful and gain positive social experiences. I began to notice that the self-esteem of non-leaders was able to flourish when they worked in a cooperative learning group with quiet leaders.

Wonderings/ Questions:

- How does the seating arrangement of children with dominant personalities affect the roles that other students take on during cooperative learning activities?

- Are those students classified as non-leaders able to be more successful and remain on – task during an activity when they sit with dominant leaders or quiet leaders?

- Are those students classified as dominant leaders more or less successful when they are seated in a cooperative learning group composed of all children with dominant personalities?

- In which seating arrangement were the quiet leaders able to be the most successful on a cooperative learning activity?

- Which seating arrangement enabled the most amount of students to be successful at the given task?

- Are there more than three types of leadership personalities that exist within a classroom setting?

MY INQUIRY PLAN

<u>What I did to carry out the inquiry in my classroom:</u>

To carry out the inquiry in my classroom, I first brainstormed a timeline of events. I decided that I would need to compose three seating arrangements or cooperative learning group combinations. I was sure to space out the amount of time before I would change the arrangements in my classroom. I wanted to be sure to have enough time to observe and analyze each of the arrangements to have as much data as possible to support my claims. Then, I classified the students in my classroom into three general personality categories: non-leaders, quiet leaders, and dominant leaders. Next, I created three different seating arrangements, or cooperative learning group combinations, and decided where I would place each student during the arrangements. In my classroom, there are three desk-set clusters consisting of four students, and two desk-set clusters consisting of five students. The first seating arrangement consisted of the dominant leaders sitting with the non-leaders. The second seating arrangement consisted of the dominant leaders sitting with the quiet leaders. The third arrangement consisted of the dominant leaders sitting with the dominant leaders, the quiet leaders sitting with the quiet leaders, and the non-leaders sitting with the non-leaders. After reviewing the seating arrangements with my mentor, we both felt that the third arrangement should not be used as a seating assignment because it occurred during our last unit of study. During this unit, it was essential for the students to act cooperatively with one another. We both felt unsure if the dominant students would be able

to do so with other dominant students. As a result, I would use the third arrangement as cooperative learning groups during activities that I organized, rather than use it as a seating arrangement.

<u>The ways I collected data:</u>

In order to easily record my observations, I created a data collection sheet (See Appendix A). The data collection sheet consisted of desk-set numbers and locations. I made the data collection sheet self-explanatory to be sure that my mentor, my paraprofessional, and my PDA were able to collect data at any given time. I recorded data during each cooperative learning activity. I would circulate around the room and record as much data as possible. When there were many adults in the classroom that were able to observe the cooperative learning groups, I would assign one desk-set to each adult to focus on. It was during these observations where I was able to collect the most elaborate and useful data for this inquiry project. At times, I collected data and observations, even when there was not an organized group activity. There were many situations that arose in the classroom that I felt I could use as data for my inquiry project. I used these observations and data to further support my claims.

Another way I collected data was through student surveys. After each seating arrangement, I had students fill out a questionnaire about working with the children at their desk set (See Appendix B). Then, I analyzed the students'

answers to notice trends or themes in their remarks. As a result, I developed my own conclusions and claims based on their input.

How I analyzed my data:

When I was content with the amount of data that I collected, I separated my papers into piles. One pile contained all of the observation papers, student surveys, and student work from the first seating arrangement. Another pile contained all of the observation papers, student surveys, and student work from the second seating arrangement. The third pile contained observation papers and student work from the third arrangement. First, I read through the student surveys. Using tally marks, I kept track of each time a non-leader, quiet leader, and dominant leader was circled as being the overall leader of the cooperative learning group. Then, I read over each of the surveys and highlighted any quote or statement that I felt I could use as evidence to support my claims. After analyzing the student survey results, I was able to notice numerous patterns that I used as evidence for my claims. In addition, I read through the children's comments and jotted down any ideas that may have a connection to what another child in the classroom wrote on a survey.

I perused through the next pile of papers that contained the observations made during different cooperative learning activities. If I noticed a trend in behavior, I would highlight the information. I used different colors and symbols each time I noticed a new trend. I wanted to remain organized as I analyzed my data. My goal was to be able to look back at my piles of paper

and be able to recognize the symbols and colors I used, in order to form solid evidence to support my claims.

WHAT I LEARNED OR NOW KNOW

<u>My claims and evidence:</u>

When dominant leaders sat with non – leaders (First Arrangement):

◆ The dominant leaders tried to take over the cooperative learning activity by distributing jobs to other students or telling others what to do.

<u>Evidence</u>: On the student questionnaire (See Appendix B), the first question asked the students to circle the name of the person in their group that they felt was the leader of the group. A non-leader in the class circled the name of the dominant leader in his group, recognizing that person as the overall leader of the group. When asked to explain his choice, the non- – leader wrote, "She told people what to do."

<u>Evidence</u>: Another non-leader in the classroom circled the dominant leader in her group as the overall leader of the group. When asked to explain why she chose that person she wrote, "She tells us what to do when we work together."

<u>Evidence</u>: A third non-leader in the classroom circled the dominant leader in his group as the overall leader of the group. When asked to explain why he chose that person he wrote, "He mostly did everything and sometimes told us how to do it."

Evidence: During a science activity called "Does Light Pass Through?" the students were asked to test numerous objects to observe what would happen when light hits an object. The dominant leader distributed the different objects that were to be tested, to each child. The dominant leader does not ask which objects his group members wanted to test, but just assigns them.

◆ The dominant leaders took charge of the activity to make sure it ran his or her way.

Evidence: During a science activity called "Peek Boxes", the students were asked to peek into a box to observe what they are able to see, given a particular amount of light. A dominant leader in the class spent his time watching each person and double-checked to make sure they were doing the experiment "correctly" or the way he thought they should be. If the group member were not completing the activity the way he thought they should be, the dominant leader would intervene and tell them how it should be done, instead of allowing the students to explore on their own.

Evidence: During the same "Peek Box" activity, a dominant leader in the class would take a longer amount of time to peek into the box than the rest of his group members. He would often take two or three looks, while the other students were only taking one look into the box. The dominant leader was able to control the activity while he held the peek box. By giving the peek box to another student, he would be losing his "power" of controlling the activity.

◆   The dominant leaders would offer assistance and help to the non-leaders, even when they were not asked to do so by the non-leader.

Evidence: During the "Peek Box" activity, a non-leader was supposed to look through the peek box first. The dominant leader in the group immediately told him what to do and how to look through the peek box without being asked. This did not give the non-leader the opportunity to figure out the experiment on his own.

Evidence: During a class discussion, the teacher asked a question to the entire class. The teacher called on a non-leader to answer the question. He seemed to be confused and tried his best to give an answer. The dominant leader tried to answer the question for him and act as a mediator or translator. The dominant leader rephrased the question for the non-leader and rephrased the non-leader's answer in order for the rest of the class to understand it. The non-leader was not able to express his thoughts and ideas because the dominant leader intervened and tried to take over the discussion.

◆   The dominant leaders tried to be the "smartest" or "best" during the group activity.

Evidence: During a science activity called "Does Light Pass Through?" a dominant leader immediately took the first turn to test an object before the other members of the group were able to. The dominant leader wanted to

make sure he was the first person to test an object and come to a conclusion. He wanted to find the answer before any other group member was able to.

Evidence: During the same activity, a dominant leader is concerned with how many predictions each person in the group got correct in relation to the real answer. He wanted to be the "best" predictor in the group and bragged about how many predictions he had correct. He was sure to tell each group member that he had the most number of predictions correct out of the entire group. Some non-leaders in the group became upset that they did not have as many predictions correct as the dominant leader.

When dominant leaders sat with quiet leaders (Second Arrangement):

◆ The strong personality traits of dominant leaders were suppressed, as quiet leaders were able to voice their opinions and be heard. In a sense, the quiet leaders were challenging the dominant leaders' decisions.

Evidence: During a math activity, the students were asked to design a symmetrical object following specific guidelines and directions. In one group, the quiet leader held the directions the entire time. There were four members of the cooperative learning group. The students worked very well together throughout the project. The dominant leader was sure to ask for his group members' opinions, rather than making decisions on his own. The dominant leader tried to give out roles to the other group members, but the quiet leaders did not respond to his command. This group worked extremely well

together, and was the most successful group in the class. They were the only group to finish the project in the given time, and produce creative, neat work. (See Appendix C).

Evidence: During the same activity, a non-leader in another group made a suggestion to her group members to make the design smaller. The dominant leader in the group explained that he did not like the idea. The quiet leader in the group agreed with the non--leader. The quiet leader supported the non-leader's request and the group ended up agreeing to make the design smaller. The non-leader was able to express her idea with the help of the quiet leader.

Evidence: In another group, during the same math activity, a dominant leader was arguing with a non-leader. The non-leader was holding onto the directions. The dominant leader felt that the non-leader was trying to take over the project. While the two students argued, the quiet leader took it upon herself to begin the project on her own. She worked quietly and included the fourth member of the group, which was another non-leader. When the dominant leader realized that the project was being completed without her input, she immediately stopped arguing and tried to include herself in the project. The quiet leader listened to the dominant leader's ideas but did not necessarily use her ideas in the final design of the project.

◆ The quiet leaders encourage every group member to share his or her ideas when working on a cooperative learning activity. The quiet leaders also try to include all of the ideas in the final decisions or projects during a cooperative learning activity.

Evidence: During a lesson, the students' task was to create a pair of jeans in a cooperative learning group. Their jeans were to be exciting and appealing to the rest of the class, in order to gain the most votes on which jeans the students in the class would buy. In one group, the quiet leader suggested that each person design his or her own pair of jeans. Then, the group will combine the ideas to create one pair of jeans. The quiet leader explained that the group would take an idea from each pair of jeans, to be sure that each group member has designed a part of the final pair of jeans. The rest of the group members agreed that this was a fair idea.

Evidence: During the same jeans activity, a quiet leader in another group suggests using the first letter of each of the group members' names to create the jeans company name. The rest of the group members agree with this idea. The group worked really well together as the quiet leader facilitated the design of the jeans. She made sure that each member of her group was able to share his or her ideas. Although she seemed to be in control for the majority of the project, she listened to the requests of others, and discussed decisions with her group before any design was created. The group worked extremely well

together and produced creative work. This group was the winner of the jeans competition! (See Appendix D)

◆ The students in my class feel that the personality traits of a quiet leader are the qualities they would like to see in an overall leader of a cooperative learning group.

Evidence: When filling out the student survey (See Appendix 1), the majority of the students in my class circled the name of the quiet leader in their group, as the overall leader at the desk set. This shows that the students felt that the quiet leaders possessed more leadership qualities than the dominant leaders in the group.

Evidence: When the students were asked why they circled a particular name as being the leader of the group, the students used positive words to describe the quiet leaders in their cooperative learning group. One non-leader insinuates that the quiet leader in his group gives positive suggestions to the rest of her group members: "When we work on a project she says 'How about we do this, just to see if we like it better'". Instead of dismissing ideas or disregarding the feelings of others, the positive leader in his group provided suggestions on how to change their project in order to be most successful.

Evidence: When asked why a quiet leader circled her own name as the leader of her group she said: "I was always making sure everything was fair and that

no one got left behind." This student believes that a leader should have a positive effect on her group members. She feels that it is important for each member of the group to be heard and treated fairly.

Evidence: When asked why a dominant leader circled the name of a quiet leader, he said, "Every time there was a problem, he tried to settle it." The dominant leader realizes that problems arise in a cooperative learning group. The dominant leader sees a quality in the quiet leader that he may not see in himself, and sees the quiet leader as the overall leader because of the problem-solving quality.

When the dominant leaders sat with the dominant leaders:
◆ The group of dominant leaders was unsuccessful and unproductive when trying to complete a cooperative group activity because some members of the group did not listen to the ideas of the other members of the group.

Evidence: During a forty – five-minute math activity, the students were asked to create an animal using pattern blocks. All of the dominant leaders had their own idea of what they wanted to call the animal and what the animal should look like. At one point during the "group discussion", one dominant leader said, "We are not making any decisions, we are just fighting!" One of the dominant leaders refused to listen to any other ideas and only wanted the design to be her own. Twenty minutes into the activity, the group of dominant

leaders was the only group that still did not have a name for the animal, or complete any other part of the project for that matter. Eventually, two of the dominant leaders in the group "gave up" and let the other three members decide the name on their own.

When the group began to design the animal, one dominant leader suggested that they pass the drawing paper around the desk set, allowing each member to design one part of the animal. One of the dominant leaders in the group did not agree with the idea. After arguing for a while, the same two members from before "gave up" again and decided not to participate. When the forty-five-minute activity was up, this group did not complete their task (See Appendix E). Every other group in the class was able to create an animal design successfully and present it to the class.

After the activity was over, four of the dominant leaders expressed their concerns. One dominant leader said, "It's always the same since preschool. I'm always in a group that fights!" He then pounded his fists on the table and cried. This dominant leader also explained, "Jamie (*name has been changed) took over and wouldn't listen to anyone's ideas." Another dominant leader in this group explained, "I'm drained. I don't understand why Jamie won't work with us. She doesn't even hear any of our ideas and she always gets her way." A third dominant leader said, "I am sick of it, sick of Jamie. Jamie ruined this project!"

When Jamie was asked how the project went she explained, "It went okay. Not everyone agreed though because Peter (*name has been changed) is

bossy." When asked if the group members argued and were mad at one another she answered, "Everyone is mad at Peter". It was obvious that there were many disagreements and arguments, due to the dominating personalities of the group members. As a result, this group of dominant leaders was unsuccessful.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

<u>Implications for my future practice as a teacher:</u>

Classroom organization is an essential part to creating a learning environment in which students can be most successful and from which the students can gain the most positive learning experiences. In the future, I plan to use what I have learned from this inquiry project to my advantage. I have developed many claims that are supported by clear evidence. After completing this inquiry project, I feel confident in my findings on which seating arrangement, or cooperative learning group combinations, enables the students in my classroom to voice their opinions and have them be heard. I truly believe that I have discovered a seating arrangement in which the most amount of students have the opportunity to learn and grow, in order to be successful inside the classroom. It was very clear that when the quiet leaders were seating with the dominant leaders and the non-leaders, the most impressive cooperation among group members occurred. The quiet leaders' attitudes and ideas were able to dilute the ruling and overriding personalities of the dominant leaders. The quiet leaders often asked the opinions of all members

of the group, rather than making the decisions on their own. The non-leaders had the opportunity to voice their thoughts and ideas, without being "shot down" or neglected by the domineering presence of the dominant leaders. The non-leaders were able to express their thoughts and ideas, but did not necessarily always get their way. Overall, each type of personality had the chance to participate in the cooperative learning activity when the three types of leaders were mixed together into one group. I know that I will use what I have observed during this inquiry project to help organize my future classroom management plan.

New wonderings I have developed:

Although I have evidence to answer my initial questions, I am left with new wonderings after the completion of this inquiry project. I have discovered that the personality groups I made in the beginning of my inquiry were too general. There was an entire personality group of students that I had overlooked. As a result, there were many students that were placed or classified into the wrong personality group. My new wondering has to do with how I would classify these students. The students I am referring to are leaders. However, they are not quiet because they speak their mind and offer suggestions and their opinions. In some situations, these students can stick up for others when their classmates are being neglected or treated poorly. In addition, these students stand up or talk back to the dominant leaders, a quality that the quiet leaders do not always possess. However, these students

can not be classified as dominant leaders because they are willing to listen to their peers and they want to be sure that each group member participates in the cooperative learning activity. Could this type of student be classified as an assertive leader?

Another wondering I am left with is how my inquiry project would have been similar or different if I had changed the number of students in each of the cooperative learning groups. Each group had four to five group members. If I had arranged for a larger number of students to work together, there would be more group conversation, more conflicting ideas to discuss, and more classmates to cooperate with. How does the number of students in a cooperative learning group affect the roles the students take on during an activity? Lastly, in a classroom where there may not be all types of leaders, what seating arrangement would enable the students in the class to be most successful during a cooperative group activity?

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