

**A Theory of Cooperative Learning as
Incentive-Values–Exchange: Studies of the
Effects of Task-Structures, Rewards and Ability on
Academic and Social-Emotional Measures of
Mathematics Learning**

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work, which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

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ABSTRACT

This PhD thesis is concerned with the social psychology of cooperative learning and its effects in cognitive and social-emotional domains. It comprises two main studies and two exploratory studies undertaken during two 10-day, 16-hour learning intervention programmes for Maths Word Problem-Solving (MWPS), respectively for 285 and 451 Grade-5 students in Singapore.

Study 1 used a quasi-experimental design to investigate the outcomes of task-structures in an Individual Learning condition and three dyadic Cooperative Learning conditions that varied in the key elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability and group goals. The results indicated that a Cooperative Learning condition with a high level of positive interdependence in combination with a low level of individual accountability resulted in significantly lower MWPS academic achievement and peer-self-concept outcomes than the other conditions; whereas the other Cooperative conditions with lower levels of positive interdependence did not differ significantly from the Individual Learning condition in MWPS academic outcomes but produced better peer-self-concept outcomes. The discussion theorises how task-structured positive interdependence in cooperative conditions can potentially be so rigid that it limits individual control in overcoming a dyadic partner's error. In turn, this increases the likelihood that members of dyads would "sink together" (rather than "swim together") –which appears to produce relatively worse MWPS academic outcomes as well as being detrimental to peer-self-concept outcomes. Therefore, optimal cooperative learning conditions for mathematics should allow interaction amongst student partners but not preclude individual control over any stage of the learning task.

Study 2 comprised three interrelated investigations of the effects of rewarding learning behaviours and the effects of ability-structures on Individual, Equals (homogeneous) and Mixed (heterogeneous) dyads. All children were eligible to be rewarded for their own MWPS academic mastery achievements, but comparison groups in each of the ability-structures were either eligible or not eligible to be rewarded for displaying target learning behaviours (LB-Rewards or No-LB-Rewards). The academic programme was based on Polya's problem-solving strategies of understanding the problem, devising a plan, carrying out the plan, and checking the results. Children in all learning conditions were instructed to use these problem-solving strategies and, according to their differently assigned learning conditions, to use learning behaviours (LB's) either *'for helping oneself'* in Individual conditions or *'helping one's partner'* in Equals and Mixed conditions. In "LB-Rewards" conditions, teachers rewarded the children's displays of the assigned behaviours for learning alone or learning together, whereas in "LB-No-Rewards" conditions they did not.

The investigation in Study 2a encompassed the same dependent variables as Study 1. The results indicated that for maths (MWPS), Learning Behaviour rewards were detrimental to Individual Learning conditions with significantly lower MWPS gains when the rewards were used compared to when they were not, whereas the opposite pattern was found for Equals where the effects of Learning Behaviour significantly enhanced MWPS outcomes. For peer-self-concept, effects varied across the Cooperative conditions' Learning Behaviour rewards conditions. An exploratory analysis of High-, Low- and Medium-ability revealed patterns of the inter-relationships between ability-structures and effects of rewarding.

Study 2b is exploratory and involved traversing the traditional theoretical dichotomy of individual vs social learning, to develop a measure combining them both in 'self-efficacy for learning maths together and learning maths alone'. The effects of

the various experimental conditions on factors in this measure were explored, allowing detailed insight into the complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic inter-relationships amongst all the variables. The findings have been developed into a theory of Incentive-values–Exchange in Individual- and Cooperative-learning, arguing that there are four main cooperative learning dimensions – “individual cognitive endeavour”, “companionate positive influence”, “individualistic attitudes development” and “social-emotional endeavour”. The argument is that students’ motivation to learn cooperatively is the product of perceived equalization of reward-outcomes in relation to each dyadic member’s contributions to learning-goals on these dimensions. Hence, motivation varies across ability-structures and reward-structures in a complex manner. A further proposition of the theory is that social-emotional tendencies and biases form a dynamic system that tends to maintain dyadic partners’ achievement levels relative to their ability-positioning.

Study 2c is exploratory and extends Study 2b by illustrating its Incentive-values–Exchange theory. Samples of children’s written descriptive reflections of their experiences in cooperative dyads are provided to illustrate the point made about the children’s relationships and effects on each other for each of the factors on the individual- and cooperative-learning scales. As such, this section of the thesis offers a parsimonious explanation of cooperative learning and the effects of various learning conditions on the integrated cognitive, social and emotional domains.

Practical implications in light of the study’s findings of optimal conditions include the possibility of practitioners more closely tailoring cooperative learning conditions to meet the academic or social-emotional needs of learners at specific ability levels. Future directions for research include testing some of the learning dimensions and proposed theoretical configurations for them using controls identified by the statistical analyses together with qualitative observations, and further developing new

methodologies for investigating the social-psychological causes and consequences of learning motivation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|--------|
| <u>LIST OF TABLES</u> | xviii |
| <u>LIST OF FIGURES</u> | xxiv |
| <u>LIST OF ACRONYMS</u> | xxvii |
| <u>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</u> | xxviii |
| <u>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</u> | 1 |
| 1.1 The Field of Cooperative Learning | 1 |
| 1.2 Shortcomings of Research to Date | 2 |
| 1.3 Research Aims | 3 |
| 1.4 Setting the Scene: Singaporean Context | 3 |
| 1.5 Thesis in a Nutshell: Synopsis of Each Chapter | 7 |
| <u>CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING: BEGINNINGS AND PIONEERS</u> | 12 |
| 2.1 Historical Overview | 13 |
| 2.2 Beginnings and Experimental Studies into the Nineteen-Twenties | 14 |
| 2.2.1 Norman Triplett | 14 |
| 2.2.2 The German Educationalists | 15 |
| 2.2.3 Allport (1920) | 17 |
| 2.2.4 Gates (1924) | 18 |
| 2.2.5 Travis (1925) and Dashiell (1930) | 18 |
| 2.2.6 John Dewey | 19 |
| 2.2.7 Kilpatrick | 19 |
| 2.3 The Nineteen-Thirties | 20 |
| 2.3.1 May and Doob | 20 |
| 2.4 The Nineteen-Forties | 21 |
| 2.4.1 Kurt Lewin | 22 |

| | | |
|---------|--|----|
| 2.4.2 | Morton Deutsch | 24 |
| 2.5 | The Nineteen-Fifties | 24 |
| 2.5.1 | Sherif | 25 |
| 2.5.2 | Thibaut and Kelley | 27 |
| 2.6 | The Nineteen-Sixties | 28 |
| 2.6.1 | Proliferation of Social-Exchange Theories | 28 |
| 2.6.2 | Growth of Educational Projects for Social Equality | 30 |
| 2.7 | The Nineteen-Seventies | 32 |
| 2.8 | The Nineteen-Eighties to Present | 37 |
| | <u>CHAPTER 3: STUDY 1 - THE OPTIMAL CONDITIONS AND TASK-STRUCTURES FOR INDUCING SUCCESSFUL COOPERATIVE LEARNING WITH POSITIVE EFFECTS IN THE COGNITIVE AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DOMAINS</u> | 41 |
| 3.1 | Introduction to Study 1 | 41 |
| 3.1.1 | Theoretical Perspectives of Cooperative Learning | 42 |
| 3.1.2 | Varieties of Cooperative Learning Structures | 45 |
| 3.1.3 | Identifying the Key Elements of Cooperative Learning | 47 |
| 3.1.3.1 | Johnson and Johnson's Key Elements of Cooperative Learning | 47 |
| 3.1.3.2 | Three Essential Elements for Cooperative Learning Drawn from the Broader Field | 48 |
| 3.1.4 | Varieties of Group Composition for Cooperative Learning | 51 |
| 3.1.5 | Non-Academic Outcomes of Cooperative Learning | 53 |
| 3.1.6 | Shortcomings of Research in the Cooperative Learning Field Relevant to Study 1 | 55 |
| 3.1.7 | How Study 1 will Contribute to Aims of the PhD Research Project | 57 |
| 3.1.8 | Research Design for Study 1 | 58 |
| 3.1.8.1 | Dyadic Pairs as Cooperative Group Size | 58 |

| | | | |
|-----|-----------|--|----|
| | 3.1.8.2 | Strengthening Statistical Reliability with Rasch Modeling Analyses | 59 |
| | 3.1.8.3 | Proper Control Groups and Well-Conceptualized Variables to Test How Cooperation is Induced | 61 |
| | 3.1.9 | Hypotheses | 63 |
| 3.2 | | Method of Study 1 | 65 |
| | 3.2.1 | Participants | 65 |
| | 3.2.2 | Design | 66 |
| | 3.2.3 | Materials | 66 |
| | 3.2.3.1 | Software for Mathematical Computer-Based Activities | 66 |
| | 3.2.3.2 | Cooperative Learning Intervention Video | 66 |
| | 3.2.3.3 | Mathematical Word-Problem Solving (MWPS) Tests | 67 |
| | 3.2.3.3.1 | Requirements for Parallel Forms of MWPS Tests | 67 |
| | 3.2.3.3.2 | Preliminary Construction and Pilot Study of MWPS Test | 67 |
| | 3.2.3.3.3 | Final MWPS Tests | 69 |
| | 3.2.3.3.4 | Reliability | 71 |
| | 3.2.3.3.5 | Validity | 72 |
| | 3.2.3.4 | MWPS Worksheets | 72 |
| | 3.2.3.5 | Progress Card | 73 |
| | 3.2.3.6 | Self-Description Questionnaire I | 73 |
| | 3.2.3.7 | Rasch Unidimensional Measurement Modeling Programme | 74 |
| | 3.2.4 | Procedure | 75 |
| 3.3 | | Results of Study 1 | 84 |
| | 3.3.1 | Overview of Section | 84 |
| | 3.3.2 | Preliminary Analyses | 84 |

| | | |
|-----------|--|-----|
| 3.3.2.1 | Raw Score Conversion – Rasch Modeling Analyses | 84 |
| 3.3.2.2 | Data Screening Procedures: Children’s Data Excluded from Analyses | 85 |
| 3.3.3 | Main Analyses: MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer | 87 |
| 3.3.4 | Additional Relevant Information from Teachers | 97 |
| 3.3.5 | Summary of Results | 98 |
| 3.4 | Discussion of Study 1 | 100 |
| 3.4.1 | Overview of Discussion Section | 100 |
| 3.4.2 | Examination of Hypotheses | 100 |
| 3.4.2.1 | Examination of Hypothesis 1: Cooperative Learning vs Individual Learning | 101 |
| 3.4.2.1.1 | MWPS | 101 |
| 3.4.2.1.2 | SDQ-I Maths-Self-Concept | 101 |
| 3.4.2.1.3 | SDQ-I Peer-Self-Concept | 102 |
| 3.4.2.2 | Examination of Hypothesis 2: Optimal Cooperative Learning Condition | 103 |
| 3.4.2.2.1 | MWPS | 103 |
| 3.4.2.2.2 | SDQ-I Maths-Self-Concept | 104 |
| 3.4.2.2.3 | SDQ-I Peer-Self-Concept | 109 |
| 3.4.3 | Implications for Theory | 112 |
| 3.4.4 | Limitations of Study 1 and Implications for Study 2 | 121 |
| 3.4.5 | Summary | 124 |
| | <u>CHAPTER 4: STUDY 2(A) - LEARNING-BEHAVIOUR (LB) REWARDS & ABILITY-STRUCTURES - EFFECTS ON MATHEMATICS ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND PEER-SELF-CONCEPT</u> | 126 |
| 4.1 | Introduction | 126 |
| 4.1.1 | Background and Contribution to Goals of PhD Research Project | 126 |
| 4.1.2 | Rationale and Hypothesis for Investigation in Study 2a | 127 |

| | | |
|-----------|---|-----|
| 4.1.2.1 | Investigation of LB-Rewards | 127 |
| 4.1.2.1.1 | Hypothesis 1: LB-Rewards Effects on Maths | 129 |
| 4.1.2.1.2 | Hypothesis 2: LB-Rewards Effects on Peer–Self-Concept | 129 |
| 4.1.2.2 | Investigation of Individual, Equals and Mixed Ability-Structures | 129 |
| 4.1.2.2.1 | Hypothesis 3: Competing – Ability-Structures Effects on Maths | 130 |
| 4.1.2.2.2 | Hypothesis 4: Ability-Structures Effects on Peer–Self-Concept | 131 |
| 4.1.3 | Rationale for Exploratory Analysis Focusing on High-, Medium-, and Low-Ability-Levels | 132 |
| 4.1.4 | Justification and Purpose of Continuing SDQ-I Maths in Study 2 | 133 |
| 4.2 | Method of Study 2 | 136 |
| 4.2.1 | Participants | 136 |
| 4.2.2 | Design | 137 |
| 4.2.3 | Materials | 137 |
| 4.2.3.1 | Software for Maths Computer-Based Activities | 137 |
| 4.2.3.2 | Broken Squares Activity | 137 |
| 4.2.3.3 | Mathematical Word-Problem Solving (MWPS) Tests | 138 |
| 4.2.3.4 | MWPS Worksheets | 139 |
| 4.2.3.5 | Mathematics Activities | 139 |
| 4.2.3.6 | Progress Card | 139 |
| 4.2.3.7 | Learning Strategies | 139 |
| 4.2.3.8 | Learning Strategies: Self-Evaluation Sheets | 140 |
| 4.2.3.9 | Pair Evaluation Sheets | 141 |
| 4.2.3.10 | Reflection Sheets: “My Thoughts – Today I Learned Maths on My Own/With a Partner” | 141 |

| | | |
|-----------|---|-----|
| 4.2.3.11 | Self-Description Questionnaire I | 142 |
| 4.2.3.12 | Student Learning Questionnaire | 142 |
| 4.2.4 | Procedure | 143 |
| 4.2.4.1 | Introductory Phase | 144 |
| 4.2.4.2 | Problem-Solving Strategy Phase | 147 |
| 4.2.4.3 | Completion Phase | 150 |
| 4.3 | Results of Study 2a | 152 |
| 4.3.1 | Overview of Section | 152 |
| 4.3.2 | Preliminary Analyses | 155 |
| 4.3.2.1 | Raw Score Conversion – Rasch Modeling Analyses | 155 |
| 4.3.2.2 | Data Screening Procedures: Children’s Data Excluded from Analyses | 155 |
| 4.3.3 | Main Analyses | 156 |
| 4.3.4 | Exploratory Analyses | 171 |
| 4.3.4 | Levels of Support for the Hypotheses | 187 |
| 4.3.5 | Summary of Findings | 188 |
| 4.4 | Discussion of Results (Study 2a) | 190 |
| 4.4.1 | Overview of Section | 190 |
| 4.4.2 | Examination of Hypotheses | 191 |
| 4.4.2.1 | MWPS | 191 |
| 4.4.2.2 | SDQ-I Peer | 193 |
| 4.4.3 | Two Exploratory Analyses: Dependent Variable Outcomes in Ability Categories and Overall SDQ-I-Maths Results | 199 |
| 4.4.3.1 | Exploration of High-, Medium- and Low-Ability Categories | 200 |
| 4.4.3.1.1 | High-Ability | 200 |
| 4.4.3.1.2 | Medium-Ability | 201 |

| | | | |
|-----|--|--|-----|
| | 4.4.3.1.3 | Low-Ability | 202 |
| | 4.4.3.2 | Exploration of SDQ-I Maths | 203 |
| | 4.4.4 | Conclusion of Study 2a | 209 |
| | <u>CHAPTER 5: STUDY 2B - PERCEIVED SELF-EFFICACY FOR LEARNING MATHEMATICS ALONE OR WITH A PARTNER</u> | | 212 |
| 5.1 | Introduction | | 212 |
| | 5.1.1 | Overview of Chapter | 212 |
| | 5.1.2 | Exploratory Research | 213 |
| 5.2 | Student Learning Questionnaire (SLQ) of Self-Efficacy for Cooperative Learning and Individual Learning | | 216 |
| | 5.2.1 | Rationale | 216 |
| | 5.2.2 | Design and Development of Questionnaire Items | 218 |
| | 5.2.3 | Item Development and Pilot Testing | 223 |
| | 5.2.4 | Rasch Analysis | 227 |
| | 5.2.5 | Finalisation of SLQ-Alone-&-Partnered | 227 |
| | 5.2.6 | Scoring of the SLQ | 228 |
| | 5.2.7 | Factor Analysis on SLQ | 228 |
| | 5.2.8 | Discussion of Factors Identified for Cooperative- and Individual-Learning Scales | 240 |
| 5.3 | Results of Solved Factors on SLQ | | 244 |
| | 5.3.1 | Configuration 1: Individual Endeavour | 249 |
| | 5.3.1.1 | Preview of Configuration 1: Individual Endeavour | 249 |
| | 5.3.1.2 | Main Results/Discussion of Configuration 1: Individual Endeavour | 250 |
| | 5.3.1.2.1 | Cooperative Factor 1 – Conscientious Worker | 250 |
| | 5.3.1.2.2 | Individual Factor 1 – Loafing-resistant | 252 |

| | | |
|-----------|--|-----|
| 5.3.1.2.3 | Individual Factor 4 – Free-riding Resistant | 254 |
| 5.3.1.2.4 | Individual Factor 2 – Self-motivated | 256 |
| 5.3.1.3 | Summary of Main Results/Discussion of Configuration 1: Individual Endeavour | 257 |
| 5.3.2 | Configuration 2: Companionate Positive Influence | 258 |
| 5.3.2.1 | Preview of Configuration 2: Companionate Positive Influence | 258 |
| 5.3.2.2 | Main Results/Discussion of Configuration 2: Companionate Positive Influence | 259 |
| 5.3.2.2.1 | Cooperative Factor 2 – Person-focused Leader | 259 |
| 5.3.2.2.2 | Cooperative Factor 3 – Good Influence | 260 |
| 5.3.2.2.3 | Cooperative Factor 6 – Identifiable Team-asset | 264 |
| 5.3.2.3 | Summary of Main Results/Discussion of Configuration 2: Companionate Positive Influence | 267 |
| 5.3.3 | Configuration 3: Individualistic Attitudes Development | 268 |
| 5.3.3.1 | Preview of Configuration 3: Proudly Independent | 268 |
| 5.3.3.2 | Main Results/Discussion of Configuration 3: Individualistic Attitudes Development | 269 |
| 5.3.3.2.1 | Individual Factor 5 – Proudly Independent | 269 |
| 5.3.3.2.2 | Individual Factor 6 – Self-empowering | 271 |
| 5.3.3.3 | Summary of Main Results/Discussion of Configuration 3: Individualistic Attitudes Development | 275 |
| 5.3.4 | Configuration 4: Social-emotional Endeavour | 276 |
| 5.3.4.1 | Preview of Configuration 4: Social-emotional Endeavour | 276 |

| | | |
|-----------|---|-----|
| 5.3.4.2 | Main Results/Discussion of Configuration 4: Social-emotional Endeavour | 277 |
| 5.3.4.2.1 | Individual Factor 3 – Resilient Self- worth | 277 |
| 5.3.4.2.2 | Cooperative Factor 5 – Socially- confident Problem-solver | 279 |
| 5.3.4.2.3 | Cooperative Factor 4 – Team-oriented | 281 |
| 5.3.4.3 | Summary of Main Results/Discussion of Configuration 4: Team-oriented | 284 |
| 5.4 | Summary of Major Theoretical Points and Relation to Previous Literature | 286 |
| 5.5 | Summary of Major Applied Points of Study 2a and Study 2b | 296 |
| 5.5.1 | High-Ability Students | 309 |
| 5.5.2 | Medium-Ability Students | 310 |
| 5.5.3 | Low-Ability Students | 312 |
| 5.6 | Conclusions of Study 2b | 314 |
| | <u>CHAPTER 6: STUDY 2C – EXPLORATION OF CHILDREN’S WRITTEN REFLECTIONS ILLUSTRATING THE EFFECTS OF EXPERIENCES IN COOPERATIVE LEARNING DYADS FOR INDIVIDUAL- AND COOPERATIVE-LEARNING FACTORS</u> | 318 |
| 6.1 | Sample Responses | 318 |
| 6.2 | Achievements of Study 2c | 333 |
| 6.3 | Achievements of Exploratory Studies 2b and 2c | 333 |
| | <u>CHAPTER 7: CRITIQUE OF ALL STUDIES: 1, 2A, 2B AND 2C</u> | 337 |
| 7.1 | Strengths of Research | 337 |
| 7.2 | Limitations of Research | 339 |
| 7.3 | Directions for Future Research | 342 |
| | <u>REFERENCES</u> | 344 |
| | <u>ACCOMPANYING APPENDICES</u> | 367 |
| | <u>Accompanying Appendices For Study 1:</u> | 367 |

| | | |
|---|--|-----|
| A.1.1 | Samples of Mathematical Word-Problem Solving Items (for Section 3.2.3.3.3) | 367 |
| A.1.2 | The Progress Card (for Section 3.2.3.5) | 372 |
| <u>Accompanying Appendices For Study 2:</u> | | 374 |
| A.2.1 | The Progress Card for LB-Rewards Conditions (for Section 4.2.3.6) | 374 |
| A.2.2 | Learning Strategies: Self-Evaluation Sheets for Individual Learning Conditions (for Section 4.2.3.8) | 376 |
| A.2.3 | Learning Strategies: Self-Evaluation Sheets for Cooperative Learning Conditions (for Section 4.2.3.8) | 381 |
| A.2.4 | Pair Evaluation Sheets (for Section 4.2.3.9) | 386 |
| A.2.5 | Reflection Sheets for Individual Learning Conditions: My Thoughts – Today I Learned Maths on My Own (for Section 4.2.3.10) | 388 |
| A.2.6 | Reflection Sheets for Cooperative Learning Conditions: My Thoughts – Today I Learned Maths with a Partner (for Section 4.2.3.10) | 390 |
| A.2.7 | Student Learning Questionnaire (for Section 4.2.3.12) | 392 |

ELECTRONIC APPENDICES

Electronic Appendices For Study 1:

| | |
|---------|--|
| E.1.1 | MWPS Revision Exercise A and B (for Section 3.2.3.3.3) |
| E.1.2 | Split-Half Reliability for MWPS Tests (for Section 3.2.3.3.4) |
| E.1.3 | Criterion-Related Validity for MWPS Tests (for Section 3.2.3.3.5) |
| E.1.4 | MWPS Worksheets for Four Experimental Conditions (for Section 3.2.3.4) |
| E.1.4.1 | Individual Learning (for Section 3.2.3.4) |
| E.1.4.2 | Side-by-Side Learning (for Section 3.2.3.4) |
| E.1.4.3 | Mutual Agreement (for Section 3.2.3.4) |
| E.1.4.4 | Jigsaw DT (for Section 3.2.3.4) |
| E.1.5 | Information Sheet for Teacher Briefing (for Section 3.2.4) |

Electronic Appendices For Study 2:

- E.2.1 Broken Square Activity (for Section 4.2.3.2)
- E.2.2 MWPS Short Form Revision Exercise A and B (for Section 4.2.3.3)
- E.2.3 Mathematics Activities (for Section 4.2.3.5)
- E.2.4 Learning Strategies for Individual Programme (for Section 4.2.3.7)
- E.2.5 Learning Strategies for Cooperative Programme (for Section 4.2.3.7)
- E.2.6 Information Sheet for Teacher Briefing (for Section 4.2.4)
- E.2.7 Table for Mean Pre- and Post-test for each Experimental Condition for each SLQ Individual and Cooperative Factors (for Section 5.3.1.1)
- E.2.8 Table for Mean Pre- and Post-test for High, Medium and Low-Ability for each SLQ Individual and Cooperative Factors (for Section 5.3.1.1)
- E.2.9 SPANOVA Tables X the Experimental Conditions (for Section 5.3.1.2)
- E.2.10 One-Way ANOVA Tables X the Experimental Conditions (for Section 5.3.1.2)
- E.2.11 Plan Comparisons X the Experimental Conditions (for Section 5.3.1.2)
- E.2.12 SPANOVA Tables X the Ability Categories (for Section 5.3.1.2)
- E.2.13 One-Way ANOVA Tables X the Ability Categories (for Section 5.3.1.2)
- E.2.14 Post-hoc Comparisons X the Ability Categories (for Section 5.3.1.2)
- E.2.15 Correlations of Gain Scores for All Variables According to Experimental Conditions (for Section 5.3.1.2)
- E.2.16 Correlations of Gain Scores for All Variables According to Ability Categories (for Section 5.3.1.2)

LIST OF TABLES

| | | |
|-------------|---|----|
| Table 1:1 | Proportion of Students in the International Top Half of Mathematics Achievement (A Selection of Countries) | 4 |
| Table 3.1:1 | Conceptualisation of Essential Learning Elements in Optimal Order By Learning Condition, Showing Implied Score as Basis of Hypothesised Ranking of Efficacy for Optimal Outcomes | 63 |
| Table 3.2:1 | Number of Grade-5 Children in Each Experimental Condition from each School and Class | 65 |
| Table 3.2:2 | Example Item for Each Topic of the Maths Word Problem Solving Tests | 68 |
| Table 3.2:3 | Difficulty Levels on the Maths Word Problem Solving Tests with Description and Purpose | 69 |
| Table 3.3:1 | Number of Children's Data Excluded from MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer Analyses | 87 |
| Table 3.3:2 | Mean (and Standard Deviation) Pre- and Post-Test Scores for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for each Experimental Learning Condition with Additional "Combined Cooperative" Data | 88 |
| Table 3.3:3 | Split-Plot Analysis of Variance for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer | 90 |
| Table 3.3:4 | <i>F</i> -Values in Planned Comparisons of Experimental Conditions and "Combined Cooperative" Conditions' Data for MWPS Gain Scores | 93 |
| Table 3.3:5 | <i>F</i> -Values in Planned Comparisons of Experimental Conditions and "Combined Cooperative" Conditions' Data for SDQ-I Maths Gain Scores | 94 |

| | | |
|-------------|--|-----|
| Table 3.3:6 | <i>F</i> -Values in Planned Comparisons of Experimental Conditions and “Combined Cooperative” Conditions’ Data for SDQ-I Peer Gain Scores | 96 |
| Table 3.4:1 | Re-theorised Cooperative Elements, with Re-Quantified Presence and Comparative Hypothetical Rankings of Positive Interdependence and Individual Accountability Hypothetical Ranking by Learning Conditions | 118 |
| Table 4.1:1 | Exploratory Analysis for each Ability-Level: High, Medium, and Low | 132 |
| Table 4.2:1 | Number of Grade-5 Children in each Experimental Condition from each School and Class | 136 |
| Table 4.3:1 | Number of Children’s Data Excluded from MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer Analyses | 156 |
| Table 4.3:2 | Mean Pre- and Post-Test Scores for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for “Combined” Individual and Cooperative; Equal and Mixed, and No-LB-Rewards and LB-Rewards Data | 157 |
| Table 4.3:3 | Mean Pre- and Post-Test Scores for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for each Experimental Learning Condition | 158 |
| Table 4.3:4 | Split-Plot Analysis of Variance for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer | 160 |
| Table 4.3:5 | <i>F</i> -Values in Planned Comparisons for “Combined” Conditions’ Data for MWPS Gain Scores | 164 |
| Table 4.3:6 | <i>F</i> -Values in Planned Comparisons of Experimental Condition for MWPS Gain Scores | 165 |
| Table 4.3:7 | <i>F</i> -Values in Planned Comparisons for “Combined” Conditions’ Data for SDQ-I Maths Gain Scores | 167 |

| | | |
|--------------|---|-----|
| Table 4.3:8 | <i>F</i> -Values in Planned Comparisons of Experimental Conditions for SDQ-I Maths Gain Scores | 168 |
| Table 4.3:9 | <i>F</i> -Values in Planned Comparisons for “Combined” Conditions’ Data for SDQ-I Peer Gain Scores | 169 |
| Table 4.3:10 | <i>F</i> -Values in Planned Comparisons of Experimental Condition for SDQ-I Peer Gain Scores | 170 |
| Table 4.3:11 | Mean Pre- and Post-Test Scores for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for High-Ability Categories | 172 |
| Table 4.3:12 | Mean Pre- and Post-Test Scores for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for Medium-Ability Categories | 173 |
| Table 4.3:13 | Mean Pre- and Post-Test Scores for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for Low-Ability Categories | 174 |
| Table 4.3:14 | Split-Plot Analysis of Variance for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for High-Ability Groupings | 175 |
| Table 4.3:15 | Post-Hoc Comparisons using Tukey’s Honest Significance Difference Test for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for High-Ability Categories | 177 |
| Table 4.3:16 | Split-Plot Analysis of Variance for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for Medium-Ability Groupings | 179 |
| Table 4.3:17 | Post-Hoc Comparisons using Tukey’s Honest Significance Difference Test for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for Medium-Ability Categories | 181 |
| Table 4.3:18 | Split-Plot Analysis of Variance for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for Low-Ability Groupings | 183 |

| | | |
|--------------|--|-----|
| Table 4.3:19 | Post-Hoc Comparisons using Tukey’s Honest Significance Difference Test for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for Low-Ability Categories | 185 |
| Table 5:1 | Trial Cooperative Learning Scale Showing Components with Example Items for Pilot Test | 222 |
| Table 5:2 | Trial Individual Learning Scale Showing Components with Example Items for Pilot Test | 222 |
| Table 5:3 | Percentage of Variance Explained by Rotated Factors for SLQ-Individual and Cooperative Scales | 230 |
| Table 5:4 | Alpha-coefficients for Each Factor of the Solved SLQ-Scales | 231 |
| Table 5:5 | Individual-Learning Factor 1’s Salient Items and Loadings, with Factor Name and Description | 232 |
| Table 5:6 | Individual-Learning Factor 2’s Salient Items and Loadings, with Factor Name and Description | 233 |
| Table 5:7 | Individual-Learning Factor 3’s Salient Items and Loadings, with Factor Name and Description | 233 |
| Table 5:8 | Individual-Learning Factor 4’s Salient Items and Loadings, with Factor Name and Description | 234 |
| Table 5:9 | Individual-Learning Factor 5’s Salient Items and Loadings, with Factor Name and Description | 234 |
| Table 5:10 | Individual-Learning Factor 6’s Salient Items and Loadings, with Factor Name and Description | 235 |

| | | |
|------------|--|-----|
| Table 5:11 | Cooperative Learning Factor 1's Salient Items and Loadings, with Factor Name and Description | 235 |
| Table 5:12 | Cooperative Learning Factor 2's Salient Items and Loadings, with Factor Name and Description | 236 |
| Table 5:13 | Cooperative Learning Factor 3's Salient Items and Loadings, with Factor Name and Description | 236 |
| Table 5:14 | Cooperative Learning Factor 4's Salient Items and Loadings, with Factor Name and Description | 237 |
| Table 5:15 | Cooperative Learning Factor 5's Salient Items and Loadings, with Factor Name and Description | 238 |
| Table 5:16 | Cooperative Learning Factor 6's Salient Items and Loadings, with Factor Name and Description | 239 |
| Table 5:17 | Lists of Factors for Self-Efficacy in Solved Individual Learning and Cooperative Learning Scales | 239 |
| Table 5:18 | Indexical Overview of Configurations and Exploratory Results/Discussion | 249 |
| Table 5:19 | Potentially Beneficial and Risky Outcomes for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for Each Ability Category (Results of Study 2a) | 298 |
| Table 5:20 | Potentially Beneficial and Risky Outcomes for MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer for Each Experimental Condition (Results of Study 2a) | 299 |
| Table 5:21 | Potentially Beneficial and Risky Outcomes for Factors in Configuration 1: Individual Endeavour for Each Ability Category (Results of Study 2b) | 300 |

| | | |
|------------|---|-----|
| Table 5:22 | Potentially Beneficial and Risky Outcomes for Factors in Configuration 1: Individual Endeavour for Each Experimental Condition (Results of Study 2b) | 301 |
| Table 5:23 | Potentially Beneficial and Risky Outcomes for Factors in Configuration 2: Companionate Positive Influence for Each Ability Category (Results of Study 2b) | 302 |
| Table 5:24 | Potentially Beneficial and Risky Outcomes for Factors in Configuration 2: Companionate Positive Influence for Each Experimental Condition (Results of Study 2b) | 303 |
| Table 5:25 | Potentially Beneficial and Risky Outcomes for Factors in Configuration 3: Individualistic Attitudes Development for Each Ability Category (Results of Study 2b) | 304 |
| Table 5:26 | Potentially Beneficial and Risky Outcomes for Factors in Configuration 3: Individualistic Attitudes Development for Each Experimental Condition (Results of Study 2b) | 305 |
| Table 5:27 | Potentially Beneficial and Risky Outcomes for Factors in Configuration 4: Social-emotional Endeavour for Each Ability Category (Results of Study 2b) | 306 |
| Table 5:28 | Potentially Beneficial and Risky Outcomes for Factors in Configuration 4: Social-emotional Endeavour for Each Experimental Condition (Results of Study 2b) | 307 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | | |
|--------------|--|-----|
| Figure 3.2:1 | Diagrammatic sequence of the Maths Word Problem Solving intervention for Whole Numbers, Fractions, and Area of Triangle and Ratio | 79 |
| Figure 3.3:1 | Mean MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer Gain Scores for Individual and “Combined Cooperative” Conditions | 91 |
| Figure 3.3:2 | Mean MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer Gain Scores for Individual, Side-by-Side, Mutual Agreement and Jigsaw-DT Experimental Conditions | 92 |
| Figure 4.3:1 | Mean MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer Gain Scores for “Combined Individual” and “Combined Cooperative” Conditions | 162 |
| Figure 4.3:2 | Mean MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer Gain Scores for “Combined No-LB-Rewards” and “Combined LB-Rewards” Conditions | 163 |
| Figure 4.3:3 | Mean MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer Gain scores for “Combined Individual”, “Combined Equal” and “Combined Mixed” Conditions | 163 |
| Figure 4.3:4 | Mean MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer Gain Scores for All Experimental Conditions | 166 |
| Figure 4.3:5 | Mean MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer Gain Scores High-Ability Categories | 178 |
| Figure 4.3:6 | Mean MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer Gain Scores Medium-Ability Categories | 182 |
| Figure 4.3:7 | Mean MWPS, SDQ-I Maths and SDQ-I Peer gain scores Low-Ability Categories | 186 |
| Figure 5:1 | Scree Test of Eigenvalues for SLQ-Individual Scale | 229 |

| | | |
|-------------|---|-----|
| Figure 5.2 | Scree Test of Eigenvalues for SLQ-Cooperative Scale | 229 |
| Figure 5.3 | Mean Cooperative Factor 1 Gain Scores for All Experimental Conditions | 250 |
| Figure 5.4 | Mean Cooperative Factor 1 Gain Scores for High-, Medium- and Low-Ability Categories | 251 |
| Figure 5.5 | Mean Individual Factor 1 Gain Scores for All Experimental Conditions | 252 |
| Figure 5.6 | Mean Individual Factor 1 Gain Scores for High-, Medium- and Low-Ability Categories | 253 |
| Figure 5.7 | Mean Individual Factor 4 Gain Scores for High-, Medium- and Low-Ability Categories | 254 |
| Figure 5.8 | Mean Individual Factor 4 Gain Scores for All Experimental Conditions | 255 |
| Figure 5.9 | Mean Individual Factor 2 Gain Scores for High-, Medium- and Low-Ability Categories | 256 |
| Figure 5.10 | Mean Cooperative Factor 2 Gain Scores for High-, Medium- and Low-Ability Categories | 259 |
| Figure 5.11 | Mean Cooperative Factor 3 Gain Scores for All Experimental Conditions | 260 |
| Figure 5.12 | Mean Cooperative Factor 3 Gain Scores for High-, Medium- and Low-Ability Categories | 262 |
| Figure 5.13 | Mean Cooperative Factor 6 Gain Scores for All Experimental Conditions | 264 |
| Figure 5.14 | Mean Cooperative Factor 6 Gain Scores for High-, Medium- and Low-Ability Categories | 265 |
| Figure 5.15 | Mean Individual Factor 5 Gain Scores for All Experimental Conditions | 269 |

| | | |
|-------------|---|-----|
| Figure 5.16 | Mean Individual Factor 5 Gain Scores for High-, Medium- and Low-Ability Categories | 270 |
| Figure 5.17 | Mean Individual Factor 6 Gain Scores for All Experimental Conditions | 271 |
| Figure 5.18 | Mean Individual Factor 6 Gain Scores for High-, Medium- and Low-Ability Categories | 273 |
| Figure 5.19 | Mean Individual Factor 3 Gain Scores for High-, Medium- and Low-Ability Categories | 277 |
| Figure 5.20 | Mean Cooperative Factor 5 Gain Scores for High-, Medium- and Low-Ability Categories | 279 |
| Figure 5.21 | Mean Cooperative Factor 4 Gain Scores for All Experimental Conditions | 281 |
| Figure 5.22 | Mean Cooperative Factor 4 Gain Scores for High-, Medium- and Low-Ability Categories | 282 |

LIST OF ACRONYMS

CTEHP = Committee on Techniques for the Enhancement of Human Performance

D = Dimension¹

Fem = Female

H = High-ability

IA = Individual Accountability

IAC = Individual Accountability Control

Jigsaw-DT = Jigsaw-(Dyadic-Task-structure)

L = Low-ability

LB-Rewards = Learning Behaviour Rewards

M = Medium-ability

MWPS = Maths Word Problem Solving

PI = Positive Interdependence

SDQ = Self Description Questionnaire

SDQ-I Peer = Self Description Questionnaire for Peer-Self-concept

SDQ-I Maths = Self Description Questionnaire for Maths-Self-concept

SLQ = Student Learning Questionnaire

SLQ-Individual = Student Learning Questionnaire, Individual Learning section

SLQ-Cooperative = Student Learning Questionnaire, Cooperative Learning section

SLQ-Alone-&-Partnered = Student Learning Questionnaire, both parts

¹ This acronym for ‘Dimension’ is only used in the index, indexed results of Study 2b’s “Exploratory propositions”, and as a cross reference in Study 2c.

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