

# **A MODEL FOR TEACHING RELIGION IN PRIMARY EDUCATION BASED ON STRATEGIES THAT PROMOTE COOPERATIVE LEARNING**

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative case study, employing an action research design, investigates cooperative learning in primary school Religion classes. The study's main objective is to explore its impact on student engagement and learning outcomes, with secondary objectives addressing teachers' instructional strategies. Cooperative learning is defined as structured, interactive group work where students collaboratively construct knowledge. Over four weeks, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, students' essays, and visual artifacts. The researcher facilitated lessons while maintaining reflexivity. Data analysis followed Taba's inductive model, involving identification of meaningful units, categorization, and theme development. Triangulation enhanced credibility and transferability. Findings indicate that cooperative learning promotes student-centered instruction and fosters cognitive, social, and moral development. Teachers implemented small-group collaboration, role assignment, peer tutoring, and dramatization. An action plan supported interaction, reflection, and differentiated participation. The study demonstrates cooperative learning's effectiveness as a framework for inclusive moral and spiritual education and proposes a teaching–learning–assessment model for Religion.

## **Keywords**

cooperative learning, primary education, religious education, student engagement, teaching strategies

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## INTRODUCTION

Under communism, education in Romania was ideologized and regarded as a tool for social control. Private and religious schools were closed, and scientific atheism replaced religious instruction (Marin, 2018). A central aim was the creation of the new man. Critical thinking was discouraged, teachers were instructed on both what and how to teach, and instructional methods were traditional, content-centered, and based on rote memorization. Pupils were treated as passive recipients of information (Freire, 2020). This system produced obedient personalities that were easily manipulated, while educators lost professional autonomy and could face sanctions for failing to comply with the Soviet-imposed model (Marin, 2018). Following the fall of communism, Romanian education underwent a process of reorganization. A new curriculum was introduced, the single textbook system was replaced by multiple textbooks, and schools were allowed to design up to 30% of the curriculum to meet students' needs (Phillips, 2010). Despite these reforms, the traditional mindset of some teachers slowed the pace of change, and certain effects of communist-era education persisted (Iacob, 2016).

The introduction of religious education in post-communist Romania, regulated by Law 84/1995, sparked debates and required adjudication by the Constitutional Court. Article 32(7) of the Romanian Constitution guarantees the freedom to receive religious education as part of the fundamental right to education. The State provides the legislative framework for religious organizations to operate denominational schools, while Religion as a subject is included in public education, respecting parents' right to choose in accordance with their convictions. Consequently, pupils belonging to recognized religious denominations are guaranteed the right to study Religion according to their faith (Zlătescu, 2017).

This study proposes a model for teaching Religion in primary schools using cooperative learning strategies. Cooperative learning fosters critical thinking, social skills, creativity, problem-solving, inclusion, and life competencies. It encourages students to engage actively in learning, collaborate with peers, self-evaluate, and develop into responsible and confident citizens (Mihăilă, 2019). Beyond its impact on pupils, this study also contributes to professional development by providing both a creative model for teaching Religion and an example of systematic classroom research to implement cooperative learning effectively in primary education.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The literature review enables researchers to become familiar with prior studies, provides insight into existing knowledge, helps identify research questions, and offers theoretical support to justify the study. It also demonstrates the relevance and contribution of the research. According to Glatthorn and Joyner (2005), a literature review involves three main steps: (a) a broad scan to identify gaps and needs in the research area, (b) a focused scan to inform the design of the research proposal, and (c) a comprehensive critique to evaluate relevant studies. In this study, databases such as Google Scholar and ScienceDirect were consulted to identify research on “teaching strategies,” “education in Romania,” “cooperative learning,” and “action research.” Following the identification and selection of relevant sources, the literature was organized thematically, culminating in a critical synthesis focused on cooperative learning approaches and qualitative methodologies.

Cooperative learning is defined as a structured instructional strategy in which small, heterogeneous groups work together to achieve shared learning goals, with individual accountability and mutual support (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). This approach con-

trasts with competitive or individual learning, fostering interaction, interdependence, and reflective understanding—principles particularly relevant for moral and spiritual education in Adventist schools, where students may have diverse religious backgrounds.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study draws on four complementary models: Bloom's taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002), social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1972), multiple intelligences theory (Gardner, 2011), and social interdependence theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Together, these frameworks emphasize cognitive development, collaborative knowledge construction, differentiated learning, and positive interdependence. They collectively support the transition from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning environments—an essential shift underpinning the cooperative Religion teaching model proposed in this research.

Empirical studies support the effectiveness of cooperative learning. Cohen and Lotan (2014) demonstrated that heterogeneous grouping enhances academic performance, communication, and respect for diversity. Gillies and Ashman (2003) found that cooperative structures promote engagement, problem-solving, and peer support. Slavin (1995) emphasized motivation as a key outcome of cooperative learning, while Mihăilă (2019) and Kincses (2019) highlighted teamwork, equitable participation, and conflict resolution as essential components of group success. In the Romanian context, research remains limited, especially regarding Religion education, underscoring the need for qualitative inquiry and reflective teaching models.

Finally, the study's analytical orientation aligns with Taba's inductive model, which emphasizes deriving categories and themes from empirical data rather than imposing pre-existing frameworks. This theoretical foundation informed both the interpreta-

tion of findings and the development of an action-oriented teaching model for Religion classes. In summary, cooperative learning represents a powerful framework for inclusive, values-based education, supporting students' cognitive, social, and moral development through structured collaboration and reflective practice.

## **Epistemological Framework of Adventist Education**

Adventist education is grounded in a holistic epistemological perspective that integrates intellectual, spiritual, social, and moral dimensions of learning. White (2016) emphasizes that education extends beyond the mere transmission of information and promotes the harmonious development of the whole person, preparing students for responsible living and service. Within this framework, knowledge is considered both cognitive and transformative, influencing students' understanding as well as their values, attitudes, and relationships. A central principle of Adventist epistemology is that authentic learning requires personal engagement, reflection, and meaningful experience. Biblical education is therefore not intended to impose beliefs but to provide opportunities for students to explore values, ask questions, and construct understanding within a supportive and respectful environment. This perspective aligns with constructivist principles, particularly the emphasis on active participation and social interaction in the learning process, as described by Vygotsky (1972).

Another key aspect of Adventist education is the recognition of individual freedom and diversity in spiritual development. Students come from varied religious and cultural backgrounds, and their engagement with religious content may be influenced by factors such as personal interest, prior experiences, and the learning environment. Consequently, teaching strategies that promote inclusion, dialogue, and cooperation are essential for facilitating meaningful learning and supporting the holistic development of all students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Objectives**

The aim of this study is to contribute to the improvement of Religion teaching in primary education through the implementation of cooperative learning strategies. Specifically, the study examines the practical application of these strategies, evaluates their impact on pupils' learning outcomes, and identifies effective teaching practices that promote collaboration and inclusion. It also seeks to develop and refine a teaching–learning–assessment model for Religion based on cooperative learning principles.

In alignment with this aim, the specific objectives of the study are: (a) to identify teaching strategies that foster cooperative learning in Religion classes; (b) to implement these strategies within an action research framework adapted to the needs of primary-level students in diverse religious settings; (c) and to analyze how the application of cooperative learning strategies influences pupils' cognitive, social, and moral development. Guided by the principle that research questions act as a roadmap for the study (Sagor, 2000), the investigation addresses the following questions:

1. What teaching strategies foster cooperative learning in the subject of Religion within primary education?
2. How can cooperative learning strategies be effectively implemented in Religion classes through activities adapted to pupils' developmental and religious backgrounds?
3. What results emerge from the application of cooperative learning strategies in terms of students' engagement and cognitive, social, and moral development?
4. How do pupils and teachers perceive and experience cooperative learning strategies in Religion lessons?
5. What recommendations can be formulated to improve the teaching model for Religion based on cooperative learning?

## Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design embedded within an action research framework. A qualitative case study enables in-depth exploration of a specific phenomenon—in this case, the implementation of cooperative learning strategies—within its real-life educational context, providing rich insights into both processes and outcomes (Yin, 2015). Action research involves iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, allowing the researcher to implement interventions while simultaneously studying their effects (Sagor, 2000).

In this study, cooperative learning strategies were introduced into a fourth- grade Religion class over four weeks. Each cycle involved planning instructional activities, facilitating lessons, collecting data from multiple sources, reflecting on findings, and adjusting teaching practices. The researcher acted as both facilitator and observer, maintaining reflexivity and generating actionable insights for classroom improvement (Clark et al., 2020; Mertler, 2017).

## Data Collection Methods

Data was collected from multiple complementary sources to ensure comprehensive understanding. Semi-structured interviews with three Religion teachers explored their experiences, instructional strategies, challenges, and observed learning outcomes. Systematic classroom observations, guided by a structured observation tool, focused on five domains: classroom organization and discipline, teaching methods, teacher–student interaction, peer collaboration, and students’ reflective responses. Students’ two-minute reflective essays and thematic collages provided insights into understanding, emotional engagement, and collective meaning-making.

*Researcher’s Role.* In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection, influencing

both the process and interpretation of findings (Creswell, 2014). In this study, the researcher implemented cooperative learning strategies in a fourth-grade Religion classroom. Multiple tools were employed—systematic observations, semi-structured interviews, and students’ two-minute essays in written or collage formats—to explore students’ experiences with cooperative techniques, structures, and strategies (Petre, 2022). Following data interpretation, an action plan was designed and refined iteratively based on emerging results. This approach enabled real-time adjustments to instruction while generating actionable insights. This dual role as facilitator and observer ensured reflexivity and informed interpretation throughout the study.

*Literature Review.* The literature review followed the three-step framework proposed by Joyner and colleagues (2018): broad scanning to identify the research problem, focused reviewing to narrow the scope, and comprehensive critique to provide a solid theoretical foundation. This process continued iteratively throughout the study to ensure that theoretical insights supported each emerging them

*Interviews.* Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three Religion teachers in Adventist schools in Romania. The interviews aimed to explore teachers’ experiences with cooperative learning, challenges encountered, perceived student outcomes, and recommendations for instructional improvement (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The researcher facilitated the interviews, ensuring questions were clearly understood, participants could freely express their perspectives, and reflexivity was maintained throughout. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed for subsequent analysis.

*Observation.* Systematic classroom observations were conducted over a four-week period in the same fourth-grade class. Observations focused on classroom organization, teaching strategies, teacher–student and student–student interactions, and students’ responses to cooperative learning activities (Ciesielska et

al., 2018). Observations were conducted by the researcher to ensure consistent recording of classroom practices and interactions and to provide contextual insights into the practical implementation of cooperative strategies. Documents. Students' two-minute essays in written and collage formats, interview transcripts, and observation notes were collected and analyzed (Petre, 2022). These documents enriched data triangulation and provided a deeper understanding of students' learning experiences, complementing findings obtained through interviews and observations.

Data collection was conducted in two main stages. In the first stage, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with Religion teachers, which provided the foundation for identifying key methodological practices and challenges related to cooperative learning. These interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the responses were thematically coded to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and relationships. Based on the insights obtained from this initial stage, a pedagogical intervention plan was designed and implemented, aiming to enhance cooperative learning practices within Religion lessons. This plan integrated strategies that reflected teachers' perspectives and contextual realities observed in the classroom. Additional data were collected through classroom observations and student feedback (via two-minute essays and visual collages) to document the implementation and outcomes of these cooperative learning strategies (Petre, 2022).

## **Participants**

In this study, two categories of participants were involved: three elementary school Religion teachers and a fourth-grade class from the same Adventist school where the research was conducted. The teachers were purposefully selected based on their experience in applying cooperative learning strategies, their willingness to participate in individual interviews, and their openness

to provide detailed feedback (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The student group consisted of fourteen pupils, seven boys and seven girls, aged between 10 and 11 years, coming from diverse religious backgrounds. The students presented varied levels of academic performance and socio- emotional development, providing a representative context for observing cooperative learning dynamics. They actively participated in cooperative activities, reflective essays, and collages, offering valuable insights into engagement, collaboration, and learning outcomes within the classroom. Informed parental consent was obtained, and the students were briefed on the purpose of the study and the expectations regarding their participation.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed Taba's (1962) inductive model, progressing from identification of meaningful units to categorization and synthesis into overarching themes and subthemes. Codes emerging independently from each source were compared, contrasted, and synthesized iteratively, ensuring patterns emerged naturally while maintaining coherence across sources and alignment with the study's conceptual framework of cooperative learning. Manual coding facilitated systematic organization, comparison, and refinement of qualitative data.

## **Trustworthiness**

Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across data sources and participant feedback. Dependability was ensured through detailed documentation of research design, methodology, and procedural adaptations. Transferability was supported by rich descriptions of the educational and religious context, enabling adaptation or replication by other educators. Confirmability was maintained through reflexive journaling and an audit trail, en-

surings findings reflected participants' perspectives rather than researcher bias. A triangulated approach was applied to enhance validity, credibility, and interpretive depth. Triangulation functioned as both a methodological and interpretive strategy, capturing cooperative learning from verbal, behavioral, and visual perspectives. Each data source contributed uniquely: essays reflected students' subjective voices and emotional reflections; observations provided an external lens on instructional practices and peer interactions; and collages represented symbolic expressions of collective learning and moral understanding. Integrating these sources allowed cross-validation of findings and enriched interpretation through complementarity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012; Flick, 2018).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

As mentioned, this study employed an inductive approach to data analysis, utilizing Taba's model as adapted by Green and Henriquez-Green (2008). This method involves extracting themes and subthemes from participants' responses and organizing them into broader conceptual categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Results and Discussion Initial Phase—Teachers' Interviews**

The analysis of the teachers' interviews provides essential insights into their perceptions, practices, and reflections regarding the implementation of cooperative learning strategies in Religion education. This section presents the main themes that emerged from the qualitative data, structured around the research questions, and supported by illustrative quotes from participants. The data were collected during the initial phase of the research, and the intervention plan was developed based on this information and related literature.

The first research question is: *What teaching strategies promote cooperative learning in Religion classes within primary education?* The themes that emerged in response to this question were grouped under the overarching theme “Methodological Choices and Perspectives on Teaching Religion,” ensuring that the findings provide a clear and well-supported answer. The presentation of results is illustrated with concrete examples drawn directly from participants’ statements.

### **Theme 1: Methodological Choices and Perspectives on Teaching Religion**

In contemporary educational contexts, the teaching of Religion has evolved from the traditional, transmissive model to a more dynamic and student-centered approach. Rather than focusing solely on the delivery of dogmatic or theoretical knowledge, Religion is increasingly viewed as a holistic formative process emphasizing experiential learning, interpersonal relationships, and active student engagement (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### **From Teacher-Centered Instruction to Relational Experience.**

A prominent idea emerging from teacher interviews and classroom observations is the shift from teacher-centered instruction to relational and experiential learning. Teachers are increasingly redefining their role from transmitters of information to facilitators of meaningful learning experiences. Lorin emphasizes: “Religion is a discipline of the heart, of lived experience, not just of the mind. I cannot just come, write the lesson, and leave. The student must experience what they learn” (Interview, Teacher 1—I.T1). This perspective aligns with Vygotsky’s social constructivism (Daniels, 2020), which underscores that learning occurs through social interaction and shared experiences. Within this framework, teachers design lessons that engage students cognitively, emotionally, and socially, fostering collaborative contexts that develop empathy, critical thinking, and value-based reasoning. Similarly, Sorana

highlights the centrality of the teacher–student relationship: “I advocate for interactive learning... for me, education without a relationship between teacher and student makes no sense” (I.T 3). This relational focus resonates with Gardner’s (2011) theory of multiple intelligences, which emphasizes the need to tailor teaching strategies to students’ diverse abilities and learning styles. Albert adopts a pragmatic yet creative approach: “I like to use learning through deduction... from very small group learning to mosaic-style learning. Mosaic is my favorite” (I.T2). The “mosaic” method allows students to engage in small-group explorations before integrating their findings into a larger collective framework, promoting responsibility, cooperation, and creativity. Observational data confirm that this method stimulated student interaction and fostered positive interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

**Active Participation and Learning through Discovery.** Teachers emphasize the importance of active involvement and discovery-based learning. Cooperative strategies encourage learners to explore concepts, construct knowledge collaboratively, and develop critical thinking skills (Slavin, 1995). Sorana frequently integrates elements of surprise to spark curiosity and engagement: “I often have a box called the ‘surprise box’... everyone is eager to see what connection exists between two or three items... the children try to deduce” (I.T3). This technique aligns with discovery learning principles, where students are prompted to make logical connections and actively construct meaning from presented stimuli. Albert complements this approach by using verse puzzles and structured competitions, which motivate learners while reinforcing collaboration: “Competitions with clear rules make learning fun while helping students work together and understand the steps” (I.T2). Lorin prefers short experiments and open conversations, noting their impact on student engagement: “Sometimes we set up a small experiment or just talk about what they feel—it keeps them involved” (I.T1).

**Visual Materials, Classroom Organization, and Interaction Rhythm.** Data from teacher interviews and classroom observations highlight the critical role of visual materials and flexible classroom organization in fostering cooperative learning. Teachers integrate a wide range of objects, maps, and visuals to create interactive, student-centered environments. Sorana explains: “I use many objects, many maps, many materials” (I.T3). Albert adds: “We should have... as many visual materials as possible” (I.T2). Lorin focuses on spatial dynamics: “I never stay at the teacher’s desk... we form a semicircle... we have a discussion” (I.T1). Arranging the classroom into semicircles and small groups promotes positive interdependence and direct communication among students (Cohen & Lotan, 2014). Observational data indicate that these setups stimulate collaboration, peer learning, and shared responsibility, echoing findings from recent research on classroom design and active learning environments.

In conclusion, integrating visual materials, flexible spatial arrangements, and interactive rhythms transforms Religion classes into dynamic environments that foster cognitive growth, social-emotional development, and collective responsibility. These practices align with contemporary theories of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999) and respond to the diverse needs of learners in primary education.

The second research question is: *How can strategies that promote cooperative learning be implemented in primary school Religion classes?* The themes that emerged in response to this question were grouped under the overarching theme “Cooperation as an Environment for Growth and Development,” ensuring that the findings provide a clear and well-supported answer. The presentation of results is illustrated with concrete examples drawn directly from participants’ statements.

## **Theme 2: Cooperation as an Environment for Growth and Development in Religion Lessons**

Cooperation within Religion lessons is not merely a pedagogical strategy but rather a fundamental framework for fostering students' personal, social, and moral development. Through structured group activities, students not only consolidate their religious knowledge but also cultivate essential skills such as effective communication, collaboration, and shared responsibility for collective success. The cooperative group thus becomes a dynamic space for meaning-making, moral reflection, and the development of social competencies, providing students with authentic learning experiences grounded in dialogue, interaction, and role assumption. In this context, Religion lessons are transformed into holistic learning environments where cognitive, relational, and moral dimensions are seamlessly integrated, supporting both academic and personal growth.

**The Group as a Space for Meaning-Making.** Interviewed teachers view the group in religion lessons not merely as a teaching technique but as a dynamic space for the shared construction of religious meaning, where students learn through idea exchange and collaboration. Cooperative learning provides an intellectual stimulus that fosters dialogue, promotes critical reflection, and encourages self-regulation, contributing to holistic student development. Teachers confirm this perspective: "Each group has a different angle—one analyzes the context, another applies the teachings to real life. Then we bring them together and see the overall picture" (Sorana, I.T3). Cooperation therefore extends beyond the acquisition of religious content, fostering social and moral skills such as empathy, patience, and mutual respect. The group functions as a micro ethical community, where individual success is interdependent with the success of others. Students are encouraged to support each other's learning process, negotiate meanings, and develop self-assessment skills.

### **Playful Scenarios and Role-Playing with Formative Value.**

Teachers frequently implement playful and dramatic methods to stimulate engagement and moral reflection. Activities such as “storytelling with an alternative ending,” role-playing between an optimist and a pessimist, or the “detective method” transform religious texts into spaces for creative and critical exploration. “The children act out Adam and Eve, asking themselves: What would I have done? They put themselves in the character’s shoes and think critically” (Lorin, I.T1).

These approaches align with cooperative learning theory, which emphasizes coordination, decision-making, and conflict mediation as essential for effective learning. Heterogeneous groups promote mutual support, self-confidence, and communication skills, while peer interactions improve understanding of diversity and reduce prejudices. Sorana observes: “I ask them to discover mistakes in a biblical text. They work in teams, argue, help each other. It’s more than just checking answers” (I.T3). This demonstrates how playful activities stimulate both cognitive engagement and social development, consistent with Gillies and Ashman (2003) and Hattie (2015).

**Role Coordination and Shared Responsibility.** A critical element of cooperation is the assignment of specific roles within the group, such as leader, timekeeper, and presenter. Teachers emphasize that this structure helps students understand that every contribution matters and encourages responsibility for collective success: “I give them responsibilities. It’s important for them to learn that everyone has a role and that each person’s contribution matters” (Albert, I.T2)

This approach aligns with contemporary cooperative learning principles, highlighting positive interdependence, individual accountability, and face- to-face interaction. Students practice decision-making, manage group dynamics, and communicate effectively—essential skills for holistic development. Research shows

that active participation and shared responsibility enhance intrinsic motivation, satisfaction with learning, and academic performance (Hattie, 2015). These findings demonstrate that role clarity, shared responsibility, and structured collaboration not only enhance learning of religious content but also foster social and emotional competencies, preparing students for active, responsible community participation.

The third research question is: *What are the results of implementing teaching strategies that promote cooperative learning on students during Religion lessons?* The themes that emerged in response to this question were grouped under the overarching theme “The Results of Implementing Teaching Strategies that Promote Cooperative Learning on Students during Religion Lessons,” ensuring that the findings provide a clear and well-supported answer. The presentation of results is illustrated with concrete examples drawn directly from participants’ statements.

### **Theme 3: The Results of Implementing Teaching Strategies that Promote Cooperative Learning on Students during Religion Lessons**

The application of cooperative learning strategies in Religion lessons confirms their value both for the educational process and for students’ development. Through interactive and collaborative activities, students not only gain a deeper understanding of religious content but also enhance their motivation, engagement, social skills, and teamwork abilities. Analysis of teachers’ responses shows that these strategies transform Religion lessons into an active, enjoyable, and meaningful experience.

**Increased Motivation and Student Engagement.** Implementing cooperative learning strategies positively influences motivation, collaboration, and understanding of

religious content. Motivation is one of the most visible outcomes of cooperative learning strategies. Teachers emphasize that clear roles and interactive activities encourage the participation of all students, including the more reserved ones. Lorin notes: “Students are more attentive and participate more when they work in teams and have a clear role” (I.T1). This observation aligns with Slavin’s (1995) theory, which states that individual accountability and positive interdependence enhance intrinsic motivation. Learning thus becomes enjoyable and attractive, generating active participation.

**Development of Social and Collaborative Skills.** Cooperative learning activities support the development of social skills through negotiation, active listening, and sharing responsibilities. “Students learn to listen to each other and share responsibilities,” affirms Albert (I.T2). This dimension is supported by Johnson and Johnson (1999), who place positive interdependence and individual accountability at the core of authentic cooperation. The group thus becomes a space for ethical and social development, based on respect and mutual support.

**Improved Understanding and Memorization of Religious Content.** Cooperative learning methods facilitate not only motivation but also deeper understanding of content. Teachers note that discussions, games, and group tasks stimulate memory and the ability to make sense of information: “When students work in groups, they discuss biblical characters and verses, which helps them memorize more easily and understand the meaning”, observes Sorana (I.T3). Through active engagement, Religion becomes not just a theoretical subject but a lived experience.

The fourth research question is: *How do pupils and teachers perceive and experience cooperative learning strategies in Religion lessons?* The analysis of the interviews conducted with the three teachers revealed several interconnected themes that re-

flect how cooperative learning is perceived, experienced, and valued in the context of Religion education. The overarching theme identified is Perceptions and Experiences of Cooperative Learning in Religion Lessons.

#### **Theme 4: Perceptions and Experiences of Cooperative Learning in Religion Lessons**

Teachers perceive cooperative learning not merely as a methodological tool but as a pedagogical philosophy that transforms both the learning environment and classroom relationships. The interviews revealed three subthemes: The Teacher as Facilitator of Cooperation, The Perceived Impact on Classroom Dynamics, and Professional Reflections on Challenges and Growth.

**The Teacher as Facilitator of Cooperation.** Teachers consistently describe their role in cooperative learning as one of guidance, organization, and encouragement, rather than direct instruction. They see themselves as mediators who create opportunities for students to learn from one another through dialogue and shared responsibility. Lorin emphasizes: “I no longer stand in front of them all the time. I go from group to group, listen, and guide them only when needed. They discover things by themselves” (I.T1). This perspective reflects the constructivist principle that learning is socially mediated and that understanding deepens through interaction. Albert adds: “When I let them work together, I see them take ownership of the activity. They help each other, explain to each other, and I intervene only when they lose focus or when someone is left behind” (I.T2). This facilitative stance enables students to become active participants in their own learning process, aligning with Gillies and Ashman’s (2003) view that teachers should act as designers of learning environments rather than mere transmitters of knowledge.

**The Perceived Impact on Classroom Dynamics.** Teachers unanimously report that cooperative learning transforms the class-

room atmosphere into one characterized by collaboration, respect, and mutual support. The cooperative group becomes a small community where values such as empathy, patience, and listening are practiced daily. Sorana observes: “The atmosphere changes completely when they work in teams. The shy ones open up, the loud ones learn to listen, and they all end up understanding that they need each other” (I.T3). Albert reinforces this view, noting that “students begin to look differently at their classmates. They realize that each of them has something to contribute” (I.T2). These perceptions confirm that cooperative learning not only facilitates the acquisition of religious knowledge but also fosters social and moral development by strengthening relationships and promoting inclusivity. The teachers associate this transformation with an increase in classroom cohesion and a decrease in competitive attitudes.

**Professional Reflections: Challenges and Growth.** Although teachers value cooperative learning, they also acknowledge the complexity of its implementation. They highlight the need for continuous adaptation of strategies and flexibility in classroom management. Sorana reflects: “At first, it was hard to get used to it. They didn’t know how to share roles or how to listen to each other. But once they understood, I noticed a big difference in how they relate” (I.T3). Lorin adds: “It takes time to organize the groups and make sure everyone is involved. But the results are worth it because the lessons become more alive, and the students more responsible” (I.T1). Teachers recognize that their own professional growth is tied to the ability to create learning situations where cooperation leads to both academic and moral formation. They identify cooperative learning as a formative process not only for students but also for teachers, who must cultivate patience, empathy, and creativity in guiding group interactions.

In summary, the teachers’ experiences reveal that cooperative learning in Religion lessons is perceived as an enriching, transformative, and formative process. It reshapes the teacher’s role

into that of a facilitator, promotes a supportive classroom environment, and contributes to both students' and teachers' personal and professional development. These findings demonstrate that cooperative learning is not simply an instructional strategy but a meaningful educational philosophy rooted in collaboration, respect, and shared growth.

The fifth research question is: *What are the recommendations for improving the teaching model of Religion based on strategies that promote cooperative learning?* The themes that emerged in response to this question were grouped under the overarching theme "Perspectives and Recommendations for Optimizing the Teaching of Religion," ensuring that the analysis captures teachers' perspectives. The presentation of results highlights concrete recommendations for enhancing the teaching of Religion through cooperative methods, illustrated with examples and statements drawn directly from participants.

### **Theme 5: Perspectives and Recommendations for Optimizing the Teaching of Religion**

The fifth theme focuses on perspectives and recommendations for optimizing the teaching of Religion by integrating modern learning strategies. The analysis concentrates on three main directions: adapting textbooks to interactive and collaborative methods, diversifying teaching resources to enhance student engagement, and using alternative spaces to support authentic learning experiences.

**The Need for Textbooks Adapted to Modern Methods.** Teachers emphasize the importance of textbooks that support interactive and guided discovery approaches, fostering students' curiosity and engagement. Sorana highlights the role of discovery learning with surprise elements: "I often have a box called the 'surprise box,' which contains two or three items related to the day's lesson... The children try to deduce. Any problematization,

deduction, or anticipation sparks curiosity and strengthens the child's motivation for the lesson" (I.T3). Lorin recommends that textbooks include questions, games, and team tasks: "Textbooks should be more than just text; they should contain challenges, team tasks, and questions that make students think and discover" (I.T1). Albert adds: "Students learn best when their involvement is not just passive; the textbook should suggest activities that stimulate cooperation and the exchange of ideas" (I.T2). These perspectives align with recent research on active learning and guided discovery, emphasizing curiosity-driven, student-centered approaches (Hattie, 2015; Petre, 2022). Teachers agree that textbooks should integrate tasks designed for teamwork, reflection, and problem-solving, supporting both cognitive development and social interaction.

**The Importance of Varied Teaching Resources.** Tangible and dramatic resources—such as costumes, puppets, or symbolic objects—are considered crucial for students' emotional and cognitive engagement. Albert explains: "I enjoy debates, I enjoy group work... I use many objects, maps, and materials. The 'detective method,' where students deduce the biblical text corresponding to symbols, is very effective, including for memorizing verses" (I.T2). Sorana emphasizes the effect of dramatic resources: "Puppets, costumes, or symbolic objects transform the lesson into a lively experience; students can identify with the characters and learn more easily" (I.T3). Albert further adds: "Varied materials and group activities not only help understanding but also develop communication, critical thinking, and cooperation among students" (I.T2). Studies support the positive impact of heterogeneous and interactive group work on student engagement, empathy, and learning outcomes (Cohen & Lotan, 2014; Gillies & Ashman, 2003; Slavin, 1995). Teachers underline that creative and multi-sensory approaches contribute to a deeper understanding of religious values and enhance students' motivation to learn collaboratively.

**Alternative Spaces for Religious Activities.** Teachers recommend conducting lessons in alternative spaces, such as outdoors or in the schoolyard, to facilitate authentic spiritual and experiential learning. Sorana observes: “Lessons about creation conducted outdoors have a stronger impact than those held in the classroom. At an Adventist school, I would schedule two religion lessons per week instead of one... some lessons could take place outside the school building, perhaps in the schoolyard or in a representative location, such as an exhibition” (I.T3). Such practices align with experiential and cooperative learning principles, emphasizing active involvement, discussions, and role assumption (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Petre, 2020).

The optimization of teaching Religion can be achieved through interactive and challenging textbooks, varied and multisensory teaching resources, and the use of alternative spaces that facilitate direct experience. In this context, the teacher becomes a facilitator of cooperative learning, supporting the development of students’ cognitive, social, and moral competencies. Individual success is interdependent with group success, making learning more effective, inclusive, and meaningful.

**Obstacles and Solutions in Implementing Cooperative Learning.** A frequently mentioned obstacle by teachers is the difference in students’ levels and learning pace. Teachers observed that within the same group, there can be highly active students as well as children who “don’t write, don’t read,” which creates tensions or imbalances. As one teacher states: “I have students who don’t write, who don’t read. The others try to help, but sometimes they don’t know how. I have to create the balance myself,” declares Albert (I.T2).

This situation confirms the observations of Cohen and Lotan (2014), who indicate that heterogeneous groups, while more effective in the long term, pose challenges in task organization and require careful mediation by the teacher to ensure equitable participation. At the same time, it illustrates the principle of social

skills development (Johnson & Johnson, 2018), where the teacher becomes a facilitator, teaching students how to support each other. Interviewed teachers explained that the solution is to assign clear roles and adapt tasks: “I have to give each student something to do, even if their levels are different. Some read, others draw, others write on the flipchart,” says Lorin (I.T1). This example aligns with Gardner’s (2011) theory of multiple intelligences, which suggests that every child can contribute through their strengths, and successful collaboration requires valuing a diversity of skills. Another obstacle noted is some students’ tendency to reject teamwork, preferring to work alone. Teachers see a direct link with the digital environment, where children are accustomed to individual activities: “Some are individualists. They say, ‘It’s easier to do it alone.’ Especially those used to phones and games,” explains Sorana (I.T3). This difficulty aligns with Slavin (1995), which showed that genuine group engagement depends on how students perceive positive interdependence: if a student believes their success does not depend on others, they will avoid cooperation. Teachers mentioned that they overcome this resistance by modeling attitudes and explaining the benefits of collaboration. One teacher emphasizes: “I encourage them to share their ideas, to see that they can learn from each other. If a classmate explains in their own words, often it’s clearer than if I do it,” says Lorin (I.T1). This aligns with Vygotsky’s constructivist perspective (1972), which asserts that learning occurs through social interaction and within the zone of proximal development, where peers can support the learning process as effectively as the teacher. Teachers also highlighted that cooperative learning strategies, if applied mechanically, can tire students: “If we do group work all the time, the children stop responding. It has to be varied, combined with something else,” says Sorana (I.T3). This reflection demonstrates mature pedagogical awareness and aligns with Gillies and Ashman’s (2003) recommendations, which emphasize the

importance of methodological diversity and alternating strategies to maintain student motivation and engagement.

Teachers noted that they alternate group work with individual activities, frontal discussions, or role-playing games: “I don’t always keep them in teams. Sometimes we do frontal lessons or individual work, but I try to return to groups, because that’s where they learn from their peers,” explains Albert (I.T2). This strategy reflects Hattie’s (2015) principles, which suggest that learning should activate different cognitive levels – from understanding and applying to analyzing and evaluating—which is more effectively achieved through a combination of methods.

## **Action Plan**

Based on the analysis of teacher interviews, several major obstacles were identified in implementing cooperative learning strategies in Religion lessons: differences in students’ levels and learning pace, some students’ reluctance to collaborate, and the risk of fatigue if activities are repetitive. The proposed solutions—assigning clear roles, adapting tasks according to each student’s abilities, alternating group work with individual or whole-class activities, and modeling collaborative behaviors—formed the foundation for structuring the intervention plan. Each—of the four lessons implemented over four weeks—was designed to prevent tension, encourage the participation of all students, and maintain an active and engaging rhythm.

**The general theme for the four lessons designed and implemented over four weeks was: “Challenges and Miracles in People’s Lives” (lessons from 2 Kings 4–6).**

**Overall Objective:** To apply four teaching strategies, one for each lesson, that promote cooperative learning in order to deepen biblical teachings from 2 Kings 4–6, while developing critical thinking, collaboration skills, and the ability to apply lessons in daily life.

**The first lesson** explores *family challenges* based on 2 Kings 4:1–7. Students worked in small groups with clearly defined roles: materials manager, social coordinator, timekeeper, and presenter. The *Know, Want to Know, Learned* strategy allowed them to record prior knowledge, questions, and personal conclusions, stimulating both critical thinking and collaboration. Alternating *voice levels* procedure and using card draws for roles help maintain attention and balance differences in engagement.

**The second lesson**, *A Stumbling Block* (2 Kings 4:38–44), uses the *Cube* strategy, inviting students to analyze the topic from multiple perspectives. Clearly assigned roles and structured collaboration allow each child to contribute according to their abilities, directly addressing the obstacle of differing levels. In this way, students learn to support their peers, negotiate ideas, and reach collective conclusions, reinforcing positive interdependence.

**The third lesson**, *The Secret Army* (2 Kings 6:8–23), focuses on idea generation through the *Starburst* strategy, developing related aspects from a central idea. Group organization and clearly defined roles ensure all students are included, while alternating voice levels maintains engagement and active participation. This lesson responds both to students who prefer to work alone and to those with different learning paces, ensuring balance in collaboration.

**In the fourth lesson**, *The Poison in the Pot* (2 Kings 4:38–44), the *T-Chart* strategy helps students analyze the story from the perspectives of the characters' emotions, sounds, and sensations, deepening moral and relational understanding. Groups continue to work with clear roles and responsibilities, while alternating collaborative activities with discussions or individual work keeps the class dynamic and ensures everyone's participation. Figure 1 (see Appendices) represents the action plan and serves as its visual representation.

## **Results and Discussion—During the Implementation Stage**

The data was collected during the implementation phase of the study from three sources during the intervention: two-minute essays, collaborative collages, and classroom observations using an observation guide. The purpose of the thematic analysis was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how cooperative learning strategies influence students' engagement, social interaction, and learning outcomes in Religion classes. The triangulation of these sources allows for a richer and more reliable interpretation of the effects of the teaching model applied.

**Two-Minute Essays.** The two-minute essays provided immediate, individual reflections from students about their experiences during cooperative learning activities. These brief written responses were analyzed to identify students' perceptions of engagement, collaboration, challenges, and personal learning outcomes. Themes and subthemes emerged based on recurring ideas expressed by the students, highlighting the most meaningful aspects of their learning experiences.

**Collaborative Collages.** The collages created by student groups offered visual representations of the collective perception of cooperation, responsibility, and communication within the classroom. Each collage was examined for symbols, motifs, and textual elements that revealed students shared values and experiences. The analysis of collages focused on the main messages conveyed and the relationships between visual representations and cooperative behaviors.

**Observation Guide.** The observation guide allowed for systematic recording of students' behaviors, interactions, and participation during cooperative activities. Each category in the guide was analyzed to identify patterns of engagement, collaboration, and adherence to classroom rules. Observations provided objective

evidence to complement students' self-reports and visual interpretations, contributing to a comprehensive view of the effectiveness of the implemented strategies.

For the first research question *What teaching strategies promote cooperative learning in Religion classes within primary education?* the findings were organized under the overarching theme "Structuring Cooperation through Pedagogical and Spatial Organization." This theme captures how classroom order, methodological variety, teacher guidance, and creative approaches contributed to developing an environment that nurtures cooperation, discipline, and shared responsibility in learning.

### **Theme 1: Structuring Cooperation through Pedagogical and Spatial Organization**

Observations indicated that effective cooperative learning depended on both well-structured classroom organization and clear pedagogical planning. The physical arrangement of the learning space, together with teacher guidance, created a disciplined and inclusive atmosphere that encouraged participation and mutual accountability.

**Organization as a Framework for Cooperation.** Across all four interventions, pupils consistently demonstrated discipline and readiness to engage when the classroom environment was organized predictably. Orderly arrangements enhanced comfort and facilitated collaboration, supporting Johnson and Johnson's (1999) principle of positive interdependence, which emphasizes that structured settings promote cooperative behavior and shared responsibility. Pupils themselves highlighted the importance of this structure. One student noted that they "liked the organization; we worked well as a team, and I feel happy," while another observed that "it was fun because everyone had something to do." These reflections illustrate how clear spatial and procedural

organization directly contributes to pupil engagement and willingness to participate in cooperative learning.

The symbolic representations created by pupils in their collages further reinforced this connection between organization and interdependence. For example, in the *Tree of Collective Success*, teamwork was depicted as a flourishing tree with branches and leaves depending on each other, while the *Symphony of Collaboration* used musical notes to represent coordinated group work, illustrating that each participant's contribution is essential for collective achievement. These visual metaphors emphasized that a structured environment provides a framework within which cooperation can flourish.

**Methodological Diversity as an Engagement Stimulus.** The teacher employed a variety of instructional strategies, including discussion, reflection, moral storytelling, and creative tasks, to stimulate pupil interest and participation. This methodological diversity not only enhanced academic understanding but also supported emotional engagement, suggesting that flexibility in pedagogy sustains motivation and promotes cooperative attitudes in moral and religious education. Pupils' responses highlighted the effectiveness of specific cooperative techniques. One student commented that their favorite strategy was the T-Chart, while another remarked that they "liked the responsibility chart." Observation data confirmed that employing multiple instructional strategies increased participation, particularly when pupils were encouraged to collaborate through discussions, creative exercises, and reflective activities. The combination of intellectual and emotional engagement fostered by methodological variety created conditions conducive to cooperative learning, illustrating that a dynamic pedagogical approach is essential for active and collaborative participation.

**Creative and Symbolic Learning.** Creative and artistic activities further reinforced cooperative engagement. Pupils expressed enthusiasm for drawing, games, and group presentations, with one

student noting, “I liked the lesson when we drew something,” and another stating, “It was interesting when we had games.” These activities encouraged pupils to negotiate meaning, coordinate efforts, and express shared ideas visually, demonstrating that creativity can enhance both collaboration and accountability.

For instance, in the *Tree of Commitment* collage, pupils’ fingerprints formed the crown of the tree, with each mark representing active participation and personal responsibility within the group. This visual metaphor reinforced the concept that cooperative learning involves structured interdependence and shared responsibility. Observations further indicated that creative activities promoted dialogue and cooperation, as pupils actively communicated, supported one another, and reflected on moral and religious content while completing tasks.

Together, the combination of clear organizational structures, methodological variety, and creative, participatory learning fostered an environment conducive to cooperation, engagement, and collective responsibility. This multifaceted approach illustrates that cooperative learning is most effective when spatial, pedagogical, and creative elements are thoughtfully integrated, enabling pupils to develop both academic understanding and social-emotional competencies.

The second research question was: *How can cooperative learning strategies be effectively implemented in Religion classes through activities adapted to pupils’ developmental and religious backgrounds?* The analysis showed that cooperative learning was effectively implemented through four key mechanisms: structured role assignment, flexible participation and differentiated support, fostering individual responsibility, and contextualization in religious and moral content. The implementation was guided by a four-lesson intervention plan based on teacher interviews, designed to prevent tension, encourage participation, and maintain an active and engaging rhythm.

## **Theme 2: Effective Implementation through Structured Roles, Flexibility, Responsibility, and Religious Contextualization**

This theme explains how cooperative learning was implemented in practice, based on pupils' written reflections (two-minute essays), the *Tree of Commitment* collaborative product, classroom participation patterns, and the activities of the intervention plan.

**Implementation through structured role assignment.** Cooperative learning was applied by assigning clearly defined roles during group activities, helping pupils understand their responsibilities and contributing to effective collaboration. Pupils confirmed this, stating that "I liked that everyone had their role" (Two-minute essay, Student 9) and "It was easier to work because I knew what I had to do" (Two-minute essay, Student 7). The Tree of Commitment collage visually reinforced this structure, as each pupil's fingerprint contributed to the collective image, symbolizing personal responsibility. Around 80% of pupils associated cooperation with active involvement and shared accountability. The structured roles in the intervention plan were evident in all four lessons, such as assigning characters for biblical role-play in Lesson 1, and specific roles in group activities using the Cube, Starburst, and T-Chart strategies. These findings support the claim of Cohen and Lotan (2014) that structured task distribution promotes equitable participation.

**Implementation through flexibility and differentiated support.** Cooperative learning was also implemented through flexible participation and targeted teacher support, which accommodated pupils with fluctuating engagement. Adjustments such as role rotation, peer assistance, and alternating group activities with individual or whole-class tasks increased involvement. Pupils emphasized the value of flexibility, noting that "We should choose our roles and change teams every week" (Two-minute essay, Student

14). The intervention plan addressed these needs through strategies that allowed pupils to contribute at their own pace and engage according to their abilities, ensuring balance between students preferring individual work and those collaborating well in groups. These findings align with Gillies et al. (2008), highlighting that student autonomy fosters motivation and engagement.

**Implementation through fostering individual responsibility and group belonging.** Cooperative learning encouraged pupils to take responsibility for their contributions while feeling part of the group. The *Tree of Commitment* collage symbolized this, showing that each pupil's participation impacted the collective outcome. Activities such as the "Know, Want to Know, Learned" reflections and creative tasks in all four lessons reinforced pupils' understanding of cooperation as both a social and personal responsibility. This approach reflects the socially constructed nature of learning described by Daniels (2020), where meaning develops through collaborative activity.

**Implementation through contextualization in biblical and moral content.** Cooperative learning integrated group activities with biblical narratives and moral reflection, connecting learning with meaningful spiritual and emotional themes. Pupils noted that "It was interesting to talk about Bible characters in groups" (Two-minute essay, Student 10) and "The verse helped me understand that if someone does you wrong, you should forgive them" (Two-minute essay, Student 7). The *Tree of Commitment* also incorporated biblical symbols, reinforcing the link between collaboration and moral learning. The intervention plan used stories from 2 Kings 4–6 in all lessons, combining strategies such as the Cube, Starburst, and T-Chart to analyze miracles, family challenges, and ethical decision-making. This implementation supports Lev Vygotsky's constructivist perspective on the importance of social interaction within meaningful cultural contexts. Overall, cooperative learning strategies were effectively implemented through struc-

tured role assignment, flexible and differentiated support, fostering individual responsibility, and meaningful integration of religious content. These mechanisms supported pupils' engagement, inclusion, and moral reflection, while allowing adaptation to their diverse developmental and religious backgrounds. The structured activities of the intervention plan ensured that pupils actively participated, collaborated effectively, and connected biblical lessons to everyday life.

Building on the analysis of how cooperative learning strategies were implemented in Religion classes (Research Question No. 2), the third research question asks: *What results emerge from the application of these strategies in terms of students' engagement and cognitive, social, and moral development?* The themes were organized under the overarching theme "Outcomes of Cooperation: Engagement, Understanding, and Moral Growth."

### **Theme 3: Outcomes of Cooperation: Engagement, Understanding, and Moral Growth**

This theme examines the main outcomes observed during the implementation of cooperative learning strategies, focusing on students' engagement, satisfaction, moral reflection, and metacognitive awareness. The analysis, integrating pupils' written reflections (two-minute essays), the symbolic products of their collaborative work (collages), and classroom observations, indicates that cooperation supported academic and cognitive development as well as emotional satisfaction, social cohesion, and ethical understanding.

**Engagement and Satisfaction in Cooperative Activities.** Students expressed enthusiasm for working in groups, stating "I liked working in a group because it was fun" (Two-minute essay, Student 4), "I collaborated well with my classmates and learned faster" (Two-minute essay, Student 13), and "It was fun when we

presented together” (Two-minute essay, Student 14). These statements indicate that cooperative activities enhanced both academic engagement and emotional satisfaction. The collages created by students complemented this perspective, using bright colors, dynamic forms, and interconnected elements to symbolize joy, unity, and shared purpose, suggesting that students experienced cooperative learning as both enjoyable and meaningful.

**Development of Moral Understanding and Cognitive Reflection.** Cooperation also contributed to the development of moral understanding and cognitive reflection. Students noted “I learned that we must help and forgive others” (Two-minute essay, Student 7) and “God helps us always, and I liked the text we memorized” (Two-minute essay, Student 8). The symbolic collages, showing trees with strong roots and symbols of unity and faith, reflected the internalization of moral lessons through collective action. Cooperation was perceived not only as a method of working together but also as a way of practicing values such as respect, empathy, and forgiveness.

**Preferences for Social Learning and Metacognitive Awareness.** Students highlighted their preference for interactive learning, stating “I like when we talk in groups instead of writing” (Two-minute essay, Student 5). Collaborative activities like collages allowed them to plan, negotiate, and assume roles within the group, demonstrating awareness of their contribution to the collective learning process.

The integrated analysis of students’ reflections, symbolic collaborative products, and classroom observations shows that cooperative learning strategies generated significant positive outcomes in engagement, cognitive development, social interaction, and moral growth. Students demonstrated motivation, deepened moral understanding, and developed awareness of their own learning, confirming that cooperative learning supports the holistic development of pupils, integrating academic, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions.

Building on the implementation of cooperative learning strategies (RQ2) and the outcomes observed in students' engagement and moral, cognitive, and social development (RQ3), the fourth research question investigates: *How do pupils and teachers perceive and experience cooperative learning strategies in Religion lessons?* Based on pupils' reflections, symbolic collaborative products, and classroom interaction patterns, the themes were organized under the overarching theme "Experiences of Cooperation: Enthusiasm, Challenges, and Adaptation."

#### **Theme 4: Experiences of Cooperation: Enthusiasm, Challenges, and Adaptation**

This theme captures pupils' lived experiences of cooperative learning, focusing on emotional engagement, sense of belonging, communication, and the occasional challenges encountered within group dynamics. The integrated analysis of pupils' two-minute essays, the *Tree of Cooperation* collages, and classroom observations highlights both the positive climate created through teamwork and the need for adaptive strategies to maintain participation and balanced interaction.

**Positive Perceptions, Sense of Belonging, and Communication.** Pupils described cooperative learning as enjoyable and socially meaningful, emphasizing the value of mutual contribution and dialogue. For example, one student noted, "I liked that each of us contributed something" (Two-minute essay, Student 12), while another stated, "It was interesting that we shared our stories" (Two-minute essay, Student 5). These reflections were mirrored in the *Tree of Cooperation* collages, where handprints forming the crown symbolized communication, support, and mutual respect. The repetition of touching hands and circular arrangements visually conveyed unity, connection, and balanced interaction. Classroom observations further confirmed that most pupils demonstrated active participation and openness to sharing ideas,

reinforcing the perception of the classroom as a cooperative community.

**Challenges of Collaboration and the Need for Adaptation.** Despite the predominantly positive experiences, some pupils reported occasional fluctuations in engagement. One student wrote, “Sometimes I feel good, other times I feel bored” (Two-minute essay, Student 1), and another admitted, “Today I didn’t collaborate well with my team” (Two-minute essay, Student 14). These statements indicate that group dynamics and task structure sometimes influenced participation. Observations revealed similar patterns, showing that teacher support and adaptive facilitation were necessary to maintain motivation and equitable involvement. At the symbolic level, the diversity of individual contributions within the *Tree of Cooperation* highlighted both unity and the complexity of sustaining harmonious collaboration. Overall, the integrated analysis of pupils’ reflections, symbolic collaborative products, and classroom participation patterns indicates that cooperative learning strategies were perceived as meaningful, engaging, and socially valuable. Pupils expressed enthusiasm, valued mutual contribution and communication, and developed a sense of belonging. At the same time, occasional fluctuations in engagement emphasized the importance of teacher guidance and adaptive approaches, confirming that cooperative learning functions not only as an instructional method but also as a relational process supporting social connection, emotional involvement, and collaborative development.

The fifth research question was: *What recommendations can be formulated to improve the teaching model for Religion based on cooperative learning?* Building on the outcomes observed in students’ engagement, cognitive, social, and moral development (Research Question 3) and their perceptions and experiences of

cooperative learning strategies (Research Question 4), this question focuses on identifying practical and meaningful ways to enhance the teaching model.

### **Theme 5: Improving the Model through Variety, Autonomy, and Moral Integration**

This theme synthesizes pupils' explicit and implicit recommendations for refining cooperative learning practices in Religion classes. The integrated analysis of pupils' written reflections (two-minute essays), their symbolic collaborative products (collages), and classroom observations highlights the importance of methodological diversity, increased autonomy, creative expression, differentiation, and sustained moral and spiritual reflection. These perspectives reflect pupils' growing awareness of the conditions that support meaningful, engaging, and ethically grounded learning, while also providing valuable directions for improving the cooperative teaching model in Religion.

**The Need for Variety, Creativity, and Engaging Learning Experiences.** Pupils emphasized the importance of diversifying activities to sustain motivation and enjoyment, expressing their preference for more playful and creative cooperative tasks. For example, one pupil stated that "I'd like to do treasure hunts or contests" (Two-minute essay, Student 13), while another suggested that "We could have more drawing or games" (Two-minute essay, Student 3). These reflections indicate that pupils value dynamic and interactive learning experiences that combine cooperation with creativity and enjoyment.

This recommendation was also reflected in their artistic products, where pupils used varied colors, symbols, and visual compositions to express cooperation, unity, and shared purpose. The creative process itself functioned as a meaningful cooperative experience, enabling pupils to explore abstract values such as empathy, responsibility, and belonging while actively contributing to the group outcome. Classroom observations further confirmed

that pupils demonstrated higher levels of enthusiasm, participation, and persistence during creative and visually oriented tasks, suggesting that methodological variety plays a key role in sustaining engagement and inclusion.

**Promoting Student Autonomy and Active Participation.** Pupils also highlighted the importance of autonomy and active involvement in decision-making processes within cooperative learning. Some expressed the desire for greater control over group organization and task selection, explaining that “We should choose our teams and change them weekly” (Two-minute essay, Student 14) and that “It’s nicer when we can pick our tasks” (Two-minute essay, Student 1). These statements reflect pupils’ need for ownership, independence, and active participation within cooperative structures. Their symbolic representations reinforced this perspective, as individual handprints, distinct artistic contributions, and personalized visual elements reflected self-expression and individual identity within the collective product. Classroom observations similarly revealed a gradual progression from teacher-directed collaboration toward more autonomous, peer-regulated cooperation, with pupils increasingly assuming responsibility for their roles, decisions, and interactions. These findings suggest that promoting autonomy enhances motivation, accountability, and meaningful participation in cooperative learning.

**Strengthening Moral Reflection, Differentiation, and Reflective Learning.** Pupils’ reflections also emphasized the moral and spiritual value of cooperative learning, highlighting its role in supporting ethical understanding and faith-based reflection. For example, one pupil explained that “I learned to forgive and do good” (Two-minute essay, Student 7), while another stated that “Working together helps us remember that God wants us to help each other” (Two-minute essay, Student 8). These responses demonstrate that cooperative learning supported not only academic engagement but also moral development and spiritual awareness.

This moral dimension was also evident in the symbolic meaning of the collages, where themes such as unity, responsibility, communication, and faith were visually represented. At the classroom level, observation data indicated that reflective activities, including group discussions and short written reflections, helped pupils consolidate their understanding, recognize the value of cooperation, and develop empathy and mutual respect.

At the same time, observations highlighted the importance of differentiated strategies, such as role rotation, peer support, and adaptive teacher facilitation, to ensure balanced participation and inclusion. Although some variability in engagement persisted, the overall trend indicated increasing competence in teamwork, responsibility, and collaborative interaction, suggesting that structured reflection and differentiated support strengthen both learning and moral development. The integrated analysis of pupils' reflections, symbolic collaborative products, and classroom observations indicates that improving the cooperative teaching model in Religion requires increased methodological variety, enhanced student autonomy, creative engagement, differentiated support, and sustained opportunities for moral and spiritual reflection. Pupils recommended more interactive and creative activities, greater involvement in decision-making, and the continued integration of moral and spiritual values within cooperative tasks. Their reflections, artistic expressions, and observed behaviors consistently confirmed that creativity, autonomy, and reflection enhance engagement, responsibility, and meaningful learning. Overall, these findings demonstrate that cooperative learning in Religion becomes more effective when it balances structure with flexibility, creativity with reflection, and academic learning with moral and spiritual development. Pupils' recommendations provide essential guidance for refining a structured, student-centered cooperative teaching model that supports pupils' cognitive, social, emotional, and moral growth.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **Summary of Findings**

This study investigated the implementation of cooperative learning strategies in primary school Religion classes within the Adventist educational context, with particular attention to teacher practices, student engagement, and learning outcomes. The triangulated analysis of interviews, classroom observations, student essays, and visual artifacts revealed the transformative capacity of cooperative learning to shift instruction from a teacher-centered model toward an interactive, student-centered approach that supports cognitive, social, and moral development.

The findings indicate that although teachers were familiar with certain collaborative techniques, their application was often intuitive and shaped by prior experience and individual teaching style. However, structured guidance, strategy modeling, and systematic feedback contributed to more consistent and effective implementation. Classroom organization and access to appropriate instructional resources also proved essential. Flexible seating arrangements, small-group structures, and the use of varied and engaging learning supports facilitated active participation and promoted deeper understanding of religious concepts.

Student engagement was generally high, as most pupils participated actively in group tasks and demonstrated collaboration, motivation, and comprehension. Reflective essays further confirmed increased enjoyment and personal involvement in learning. At the same time, differences in participation levels were observed, highlighting the importance of teacher facilitation and differentiated support to ensure inclusive involvement.

An additional important finding was that engagement was not determined solely by students' religious family background. Pupils from both Adventist and non-Adventist or less religious families showed meaningful participation. This suggests that instructional

design, classroom climate, and the structure of cooperative activities play a more significant role in fostering engagement than prior religious exposure alone. Figure 1 (see Appendices) represents the proposed model and serves as its visual representation.

## **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

These findings carry important implications for Religion education, particularly in Adventist school settings. From a theoretical perspective, the results align with constructivist and social learning theories, emphasizing that meaningful understanding develops through interaction, collaboration, and active involvement. Within the Adventist philosophy of education, which promotes holistic development and respects individual freedom of belief, cooperative learning provides an approach that encourages reflection, dialogue, and spiritual growth.

From a practical standpoint, the study underscores the teacher's central role as a facilitator of learning. While prior experience influenced the initial adoption of cooperative methods, professional development, modeling, and reflective practice were critical for their effective use. This highlights the need for teacher education programs in Adventist schools to prioritize experiential training and practical strategies for organizing and guiding cooperative learning. Furthermore, the findings suggest that effective Religion instruction should not depend primarily on students' prior religious knowledge or family context. Instead, it should intentionally create inclusive learning environments that support exploration, participation, and personal meaning-making. Cooperative learning, combined with thoughtful classroom organization and reflective tools such as student writing and feedback, can enhance both academic learning and students' moral and spiritual development.

In practical terms, teaching Religion in Adventist schools extends beyond the transmission of doctrinal content. It involves

creating opportunities for students to engage actively with ideas, reflect personally, collaborate with peers, and develop understanding within a respectful and supportive learning community.

## **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted with a relatively small sample within a specific educational and cultural context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the duration of the intervention did not allow for examination of long-term effects on students' academic, moral, and spiritual development. Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal designs that examine sustained outcomes over time. Further studies may also explore the application of cooperative learning across different age groups, school environments, and cultural contexts. Additionally, investigating the integration of digital tools into cooperative Religion instruction represents a promising direction for further inquiry.

## **Final Conclusion**

Overall, this study demonstrates that cooperative learning is a valuable and effective approach for teaching Religion in Adventist primary education. By fostering active participation, collaboration, and personal reflection, it supports not only academic achievement but also students' social competencies and moral growth. When supported by adequate teacher preparation, intentional implementation, and a supportive classroom environment, cooperative learning can contribute to more meaningful, inclusive, and transformative Religion education.

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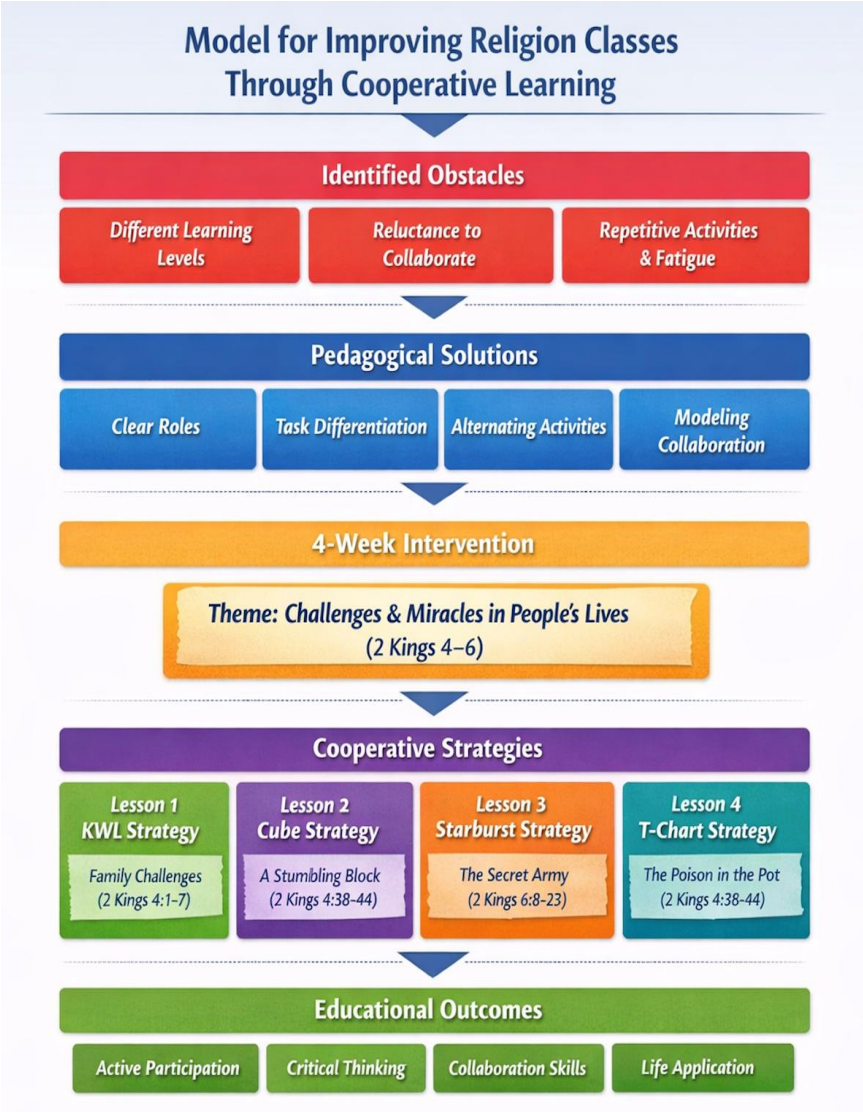
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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Additional figures

Figure 1. Action Plan



Note: ChatGPT generated

Figure 2. A Model to Improve Religion Classes



Note: ChatGPT generated

## **Appendix B. Observation Guide**

### **1. Classroom Space Organization**

*Order and discipline.* The following scale will be used to assess the extent to which students comply with classroom rules:

- Unsatisfactory – The student rarely follows classroom rules; frequently disrupts activities, ignores instructions, and contributes to a disorganized environment.
- Partially Satisfactory – The student occasionally follows rules but requires frequent reminders; sometimes contributes to disorder and complies with discipline requirements inconsistently.
- Satisfactory – The student follows classroom rules most of the time, with rare exceptions; adheres to instructions and maintains disciplined behavior, showing awareness of the classroom environment.
- Excellent – The student consistently follows classroom rules without reminders; actively contributes to maintaining order and discipline, positively influencing peers.

### **2. Teaching Methods Employed**

*Interest in activities* will be assessed using the following scale:

- Unsatisfactory – The student shows no interest in activities; does not participate, refuses engagement, and demonstrates no curiosity about the subject.
- Partially Satisfactory – The student shows limited interest; participation is sporadic and engagement occurs only when prompted or when the activity captures their attention.
- Satisfactory – The student shows moderate interest; participates actively and contributes, though occasional disengagement or distraction may occur.
- Excellent – The student demonstrates strong interest; participates enthusiastically, asks relevant questions, and contributes actively to discussions, showing sustained curiosity about the material.

### **3. Teacher–Student Interaction**

*Constructive feedback* will be assessed using the following scale:

- Unsatisfactory – The student provides no constructive feedback to the teacher; does not express opinions about teaching or activities, and any comments are negative and unconstructive.
- Partially Satisfactory – The student rarely provides constructive feedback; comments are limited, general, or vague and do not address specific aspects of teaching or activities.
- Satisfactory – The student provides constructive feedback to a moderate

extent; acknowledges strengths in teaching and occasionally suggests improvements, expressing ideas clearly and relevantly.

- Excellent – The student consistently provides constructive, specific, and detailed feedback; appreciates teaching methods and suggests improvements in a clear and respectful manner, contributing to the ongoing development of the educational process.

#### **4. Student–Student Interaction**

*Collaboration and mutual support* will be assessed using the following scale:

- Unsatisfactory – Students do not collaborate; they do not help one another or provide support during activities, displaying competitive or indifferent behavior toward peers.
- Partially Satisfactory – Students collaborate sporadically; support is limited and involvement in helping peers fluctuates, with both cooperative and isolating behaviors.
- Satisfactory – Students collaborate to a moderate extent; they help one another in most activities and share knowledge, contributing to overall group success.
- Excellent – Students collaborate consistently and actively support one another; they offer help readily and contribute to a positive and cohesive learning environment in which all peers feel supported.

#### **5. Student Responses**

*Personal reflection*, defined as the ability to express relevant thoughts and feelings in the two-minute essay, will be assessed using the following scale:

- Unsatisfactory – The student fails to express relevant thoughts or feelings; the essay is vague, incoherent, and lacks a clear connection to the topic discussed.
- Partially Satisfactory – The student expresses some thoughts and feelings, but they are superficial and insufficiently developed; the essay contains moments of confusion and lack of clarity.
- Satisfactory – The student expresses relevant thoughts and feelings, though their development is limited; the essay is generally clear but could benefit from more detail and deeper reflection.
- Excellent – The student expresses relevant thoughts and feelings clearly and coherently; the essay is well structured, includes deep reflection and supporting details, and demonstrates a clear understanding of the topic.