



The Dumbbells: Divulging the Untold Story of “Free-Riding” Students

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ABSTRACT

Some students have been free-riding during group activities, which has been a major issue. While several studies have focused on the perceptions of those who carry the free riders, there has been a lack of research on the perceptions of free-riding students toward group activities. Through the use of qualitative research methods, this study explored the reasons behind the free-riding behaviors of students from two schools in Tacurong City, as well as how different aspects of their educational and personal histories affected how well they performed in group activities. Six students were the subjects of observational studies and interviews. The findings of this investigation demonstrated that the motivation of the students for engaging in free-riding practices was related to their socialization skills, technical skills, self-esteem, shyness, financial situation, family situation, and academic abilities. Furthermore, free-riding students are aware of their inappropriate behavior and poor performance during cooperative learning. While most are guilty of their actions, some enjoy free-riding because it provides them with benefits and accomplishments that are beyond their capabilities. The study's findings can assist instructors in better understanding students' perceptions of group activities and improve their teaching methods.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the academic aspect of life, there are a profuse number of activities assigned by our teachers as a medium in assessing our intelligence as well as capabilities. One famous strategy used by most educators is called cooperative learning.

Cooperative Learning is a learning strategy or method used where a small number of students are grouped to work together on a shared assignment or group activity (Smith, 1996; Gillies, 2004; Gillies, 2016). Due to the effective working model, it presents in the workplace, this kind of instructional approach provides students with emotional and interpersonal experiences that improve their awareness, judgment, critical analysis, creative problem-solving, and goal-directed behavior.

However, studies have also shown that the outcomes students receive from these groups may not always be the best or most advantageous due to the team-based assessment. Especially in high school, most students claimed to have uncooperative and not participative group members; these people are frequently referred to as "dumbbells" or free riders due to their free-riding behaviors.

In 2015, the World Economic Forum (WEF) conducted a meta-analysis, which included voluntary student feedback comments, 30% of the students described the team-based assessment as a chance to work together, gain knowledge from peers, develop social networks, and hone cooperation abilities in a practical setting. However, students cited a lack of passion and an unequal workload distribution from their group members in the remaining 70% of remarks, which were unfavorable. This type of student behavior is known as "free-riding".

Free-riding is when one or more group members decide not to contribute to the group's work or task (Strong & Anderson, 1990; Swaray, 2012; Maiden & Perry, 2011). This typically upsets the dynamics of the group since the other members are forced to make up for the free rider's absence from work (Einola & Alvesson, 2019; Koppenhaver & Shrader, 2003). Furthermore, such free-riding, which is commonly observed in cooperative learning groups utilized in high schools and universities, may be transmitted as a learned ability in the professional context.

In every group task, there will always be a dumbbell or a free-ride member, creating several problems for other individuals in the group. This turns out to be the main problem in group projects of this nature, where some students work less diligently than they do when working alone (Samarakoon et al., 2019). Additionally, because of the pandemic and recent technological advancements, online technologies are used for either online or face-to-face learning, which permits some people to free-ride, leading to a sharp increase in the number of free-riding incidents.

Most preceding research has only examined the members carrying the free riders. As a result, this research will aid in comprehending the free-riding behavior of the students through the lens of group activities.

This research thereby addressed the perceived gap in the experiences of free-riding students of high schools in Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat. It investigates the causes, their shared experiences, and how various factors such as their educational background and life experiences influence their performance in group activities.

2. METHODS

The study used a qualitative research approach to explore a range of experiences, including the causes of the free-riding behavior of the students and its effects. Specifically, the

Phenomenological approach had been used and participants were interviewed through personal or face-to-face contact. Furthermore, the information was gathered using a semi-structured interview questionnaire. The data were first acquired through note-taking and recording, and then they were analyzed using the thematic approach of assessment

2.1. Participants of the Study

The following criteria were used to select the participants: (a) student must be a high school student from one of the two selected institutions in Tacurong City, with an age range of 15 to 20 years old, (b) has recently or previously engaged in free-riding during group activities, must be an identified free-rider by their teachers, (c) the pupil must be either a junior or a senior student of the said institutions, (d) must be a student living within the Tacurong City area.

2.2. Data Gathering Instrument

We had a set of researcher-constructed instruments consisting of two (2) parts to collect the necessary data. The first section requested basic information from the participant to create a profile for discussion purposes. The semi-structured interview questions were in the second part. This contained both guide questions and supplementary clarifying or follow-up questions to get more information from participants. The interview questions provided structure and functioned as a guide for the interview process.

2.3. Data Gathering Procedure

We had written a letter to the heads of the three chosen Tacurong City institutions, requesting permission for the preselected students to partake in the semi-structured interview. We initially prepared the questionnaires that were a part of the semi-structured interview. Based on the questionnaire, the participants for the interview were identified using the inclusion criteria and according to the data needed for the research. The selected participants were invited via letter, and as a result, a consent form was collected. Face-to-face interaction was also utilized to conduct the semi-structured individual interviews with the participants. The interview was recorded using an audio recorder. After each interview, some of the questions were reviewed for clarification and the participants were asked if they wanted to provide additional information. For every interview, we listened to the recorded interview at least twice. The recordings were transcribed, reviewed for accuracy, and translated into English by we. All statements made during the semi-structured interview were recorded verbatim for the transcription. Data analysis was then performed on the final interviews that had been transcribed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the experiences of the chosen five (5) participants have shared their reasons and impacts of their free-riding actions during cooperative learning activities. Six (6) emergent themes were generated for the causes, and subsequently, four (4) themes for the results, which are as follows:

3.1. Why do students free ride in Cooperative Learning Activities?

With the obtained data from the students through interviews, and by following the thematic type of analyzing data, we were able to identify the distinct causes of such phenomenon and create categories that can elucidate the gathered data. Specific themes

were distinguished; the six (6) themes analyzed are as follows: (a) Lack of Academic Capabilities, (b) Difficulties with Socializing, (c) Financial Inadequacy, (d) Problems with Family Dynamics, (e) Leisure Over Academics, and (f) Lack of Technical Skills.

- (i) **Lack of Academic Capabilities.** One of the emerging catalysts of the free-riding behavior of students is their lack of ability in the field of academic-related activities known as written assessments and oral recitation for the reason that they do not possess the talent of fast and good memory, hence they are not that adept and do not retain much knowledge needed for the activities. In addition, one of them revealed that they are more gifted when it comes to actual and physical skills rather than memory retention and contextual comprehension. Most importantly, their responses can make others understand that intelligence is not solely based on mental ability but is far beyond it.
- (ii) **Difficulties With Socializing.** The students admitted that they sometimes struggle to contribute to their group during group activities because of socializing difficulties. As a person who struggles with socialization, it's difficult to the point where their group mates perceive them as free-riding students. Moreover, the participants were aware that their group members perceived them as students who didn't care about the group's product or as someone who didn't want to help the group; however, this was not the case, they explained. One student has clearly stated that one of the reasons they chose to engage in free-riding practices is because they are having difficulty socializing and don't know how to socialize with other people.
- (iii) **Financial Inadequacy.** The issue of money also manifests itself during group activities. In some cases, students had difficulties cooperating when they were required to contribute a certain amount of money as a fund for the expenses of their group performances. Students are somehow dissatisfied with this type of resolution during group activities in the classroom setting because it demonstrates how unfair the situation is for them and how they have no choice but to contribute nothing or a small portion of the original amount. The most important difficulty that students encounter is transportation. Most students who do not live close to their lecture locations must travel a considerable distance to their separate lecture venues due to financial restrictions. Only those who are financially stable can pay the substantial amount of money needed each week for a student's transport to and from school.
- (iv) **Problems With Family Dynamics.** Family problems are unavoidable and have a significant impact on students' academic performance, especially during group performances. Although a few of the students stated that family problems do not affect their contribution during group activities, still, a student stated that it does. Students sometimes struggle to concentrate on group activities because their problems at home are always bothering them.
- (v) **Leisure Over Academics.** At some times, students were unable to contribute during group activities due to leisure activities. The limited leisure time and resulting lack of opportunities to gain extracurricular experiences are frequently brought up in conversation. Significantly, some students often prefer leisure over academics because of the pleasure it provides.
- (vi) **Lack of Technical Skills.** Students had a hard time contributing to their assigned task, particularly on role plays and dances because they were not equipped with the technical skills that are required to execute the act. Additionally, they also felt nervous and anxious whenever they would speak in front of an audience. As a result, students are also scolded by their group mates due to their poor performance. There is somehow an equilibrium between the academic and technical or physical ability struggles of the participants.

3.2. What are the results of students' free-riding behavior?

With the acquired data from the conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews, and by utilizing the thematic way of analyzing data, we were able to determine the varying results or effects of such action and create categories that can further discuss them. The three (3) emergent themes that were analyzed are the following: (a) Conscience Awakening, (b) Effortless Success, and (c) No Scholastic Improvements.

- (i) **Conscience Awakening.** Free-riding students sometimes feel like their conscience is aroused in a way that they feel even just a bit of guilt for their negligence and inappropriate behavior while accomplishing assigned group tasks. Furthermore, this implies that they are regretful of the shortcomings they had, but they nevertheless want to contribute something to their group.
- (ii) **Effortless Success.** The free-riding students stated that they were happy even though they did not do their best, and they were also pleased by the efforts of their group mates who dragged them up and helped them. Furthermore, the free-riding members of a group must be dragged upwards because they are aware of their limits if they were to do it all on their own. Finally, others can see from their responses how much help they have been to their free-riding members, and how fulfilled they may feel in saving others from the abyss of failure.
- (iii) **No Scholastic Improvements.** According to the participants, free-riding affects the overall improvement of the students; furthermore, improvement is not visible in a member of the group who engaged in free-riding. One person stated that he does not enjoy group activities and thus does not care what grade he receives. His lack of concern for his grade indicates that he is already satisfied and seeks only minor improvements. The other participant, on the other hand, has admitted that she has made no progress because she does nothing and does not train herself.

4. CONCLUSION

Analysis of the result simply means that after the conduct of semi-structured interviews as a way to divulge the untold story of free-riding students, significant information was disclosed. Personal struggles were observable. And, environmental factors that contribute to such behavior were evident.

Furthermore, the result of this study showed that free-riding students engage in free-riding practices for a variety of reasons, some causes include the lack of socialization skills, technical skills, self-esteem, shyness, financial status, family situation, and academic abilities. Also, it was revealed that while most felt guilty, 33.33% of them felt happy. This states that the free-riding students view such acts as a favor because they give them benefits and accomplishments that are a bit beyond their limitations. In addition to that, students who were free-riding are aware of their inappropriate behavior and poor performance during cooperative learning; they reflect on themselves and believe they should have done something. These students understand that such behavior can negatively affect their abilities, skills, talents, and progress, as well as harm their future. They advised me not to be a free rider, but to strive to learn, do well, and dream big to have a bright future. To sum up, free-riding behavior by some members of the group during group activities is not always intentional. Several possible reasons for free-riding must be understood because they serve as useful starting points for developing solutions to the problem.

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6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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