



Let's Help Student through Cooperative Learning

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ABSTRACT: *"In the forest, tree leans on tree, in a nation [people on people]."* -Eastern European Proverb Cooperative learning has a lot going for it, from motivating students to increasing students' self esteem. So how can you implement cooperative learning? There are dozens of strategies that can work and many resources that can help you determine what makes the most sense for your group. This paper describes how teachers can establish and create cooperative classrooms in which every aspect of the structure, organization, and instruction are consistent with creating an environment that recognizes and respects student diversity and allows students to help one another to succeed. It is possible to implement cooperative learning at many levels, from specific cooperative learning group projects to the use of cooperative games. Teachers can examine every aspect of what goes on in their classrooms, reshaping what they say and do, how they teach and what they teach, in order to teach students to be cooperative and to understand the meaning of cooperation in their lives. This paper explores the implementation of the cooperative classroom at three levels: creating a cooperative classroom environment, using cooperative learning groups and projects, and structuring cooperative instructional and recreational games. Each of these strategies can be used in isolation with considerable success; when implemented as a consistent "package," however, these strategies can do even more for creating supportive school environments in which all students can succeed.

I. INTRODUCTION

When classrooms are purposively heterogeneous, one clear objective is that students will develop an understanding and respect for one another's differences and will find ways in which to support and nurture each other's learning. Competitive classrooms, in which students attempt to prove to themselves, to their classmates, and to their teacher that they are the best, first, smartest, or fastest, are clearly incompatible with this objective. In renouncing competition and trying to avoid the negative consequences of pitting students against each other in the classroom, some schools and teachers have turned, instead, to individualization, each child doing his or her own thing in isolation from other students. Although some of the negative effects of competition are, in fact, avoided in this way, much is lost. Students are not given the opportunity to learn to work together, to recognize their similarities and their differences, to learn a whole repertoire of teaching and supporting skills. Cooperative learning provides an obvious, and yet often neglected, alternative-a way of structuring the classroom so that students work together to accomplish goals, accommodating each other's differences and finding ways to encourage and nourish high levels of achievement and positive social interaction.

This paper describes how teachers can establish and create cooperative classrooms in which every aspect of the structure, organization, and instruction are consistent with creating an environment that recognizes and respects student diversity and allows students to help one another to succeed. It is possible to implement cooperative learning at many levels, from specific cooperative learning group projects to the use of cooperative games. Teachers can examine every aspect of what goes on in their classrooms, reshaping what they say and do, how they teach and what they teach, in order to teach students to be cooperative and to understand the meaning of cooperation in their lives. This paper explores the implementation of the cooperative classroom at three levels: creating a cooperative classroom environment, using cooperative learning groups and projects, and structuring cooperative instructional and recreational games. Each of these strategies can be used in isolation with considerable success; when implemented as a consistent "package," however, these strategies can do even more for creating supportive school environments in which all students can succeed.

II. CREATING A COOPERATIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Everything a teacher says or does in the classroom has an effect on how students view themselves and each other. Students can learn to see each other as "enemies" where one's success denotes the other's failure, or as "friends," where one's success contributes to and reinforces the other's. The following strategies represent areas in which teachers can have an immediate impact in creating "friendly classrooms."

Eliminate Competitive Classroom Symbols

To create a friendly, cooperative classroom all competitive symbols should be eliminated. To start, take down the star charts on the walls and any other visual displays of who is doing well and who is not. Do not read student scores aloud, return papers in order of score, or write classroom averages on the blackboard. The teacher should consider the following criterion when determining whether or not a specific act will promote or discourage cooperation: if an outside visitor to the classroom can look around and see who is doing well and who is not by looking at the board, the walls, or the seating arrangement, then the classroom atmosphere exemplifies competition. Another way to eliminate competitive symbols is to create bulletin boards that include the work of all children rather than posting the "five best compositions or drawings." A third grade teacher created an elaborate underwater scene on one wall, with each child's contribution visible-fish, seaweed, skin divers, and so forth. Although there were differences in the complexity of the drawings the children had done, the overall message was one of inclusion, each child's addition improving the quality of the display. Class murals, displays in which every child adds his or her contribution, class books, and other such projects all create a sense of community and belonging with each child viewed as a contributing member of the group.

Use Inclusive Language

The language teachers use carries powerful messages about belonging and cooperation. Teachers should refer to students as "students," "class," or "kids," rather than as "boys and girls" or by reference to specific groups. The commonly advised behavior management strategies in which the teacher calls attention to the exemplary behavior of a single child or a group or explicitly or implicitly compares groups (i.e., "Let's see which row can get quiet fastest," "I like the way Mark and Kevin are raising their hands," or "The red group can go to lunch first today because they're all listening") should not be used. Instead, encourage group achievement or group solidarity by using language such as, "We can go outside when we all have the room straightened up" (and then encourage helping and cooperating) or, "I'm so impressed by all of the reading I saw this morning!". If a particular child or a small group of children present unique problems, the entire class should be engaged in problem solving in an inclusive way; for example, "What can we do about making sure that all the papers get turned in after morning work?" Students should be encouraged to see that they have an important role to play in supporting their peers to be contributing and productive class members.

Build the Classroom Community

A sense of belonging and cohesion can be built by activities that draw the whole class together. Putting on plays, some students writing the script, some painting the scenery, some drawing posters, and others making popcorn, can be a community-building experience that can easily involve students of varying levels of academic proficiency, English-language skill, physical ability, and so forth. Singing together also creates a sense of community; class members can take turns teaching and leading songs or small groups of students can take responsibility for directing the morning's music. The teacher should encourage sharing of all kinds and structure situations in which every child has a chance to speak and be heard. For example, consider allowing students to begin the day by telling a joke, describing a humorous event that happened at home, or just sharing something they have been thinking about.

Encourage Students to Use One Another as Resources

Teachers can create multiple opportunities for students to see each other as sources of information, instruction, and support. One teacher arranges her students' desks in clusters and sets a rule: if anyone in the group has a problem of any sort, they must consult with their group before coming to the teacher for help. The number of questions that the teacher must field is reduced considerably, but, more importantly, all class members get to explain, comfort, and act as miniteachers and committed friends. Additionally, a Classroom Yellow Pages can be developed to include lists of individual students and their skills/talents, and then the class can be encouraged to turn to those people as resources. One teacher reported that when her class found out that Melissa, who was not an exceptional student, was interested in and knowledgeable about cats, they asked questions of her and brought to her attention information and articles that they found. Melissa was validated and the rest of the class saw her as someone who knew a lot about something, even if there were other areas in which she was not proficient.

Another opportunity for students to use one another as resources is to implement peer teaching at many levels. Study partners (two students assigned to work together) are a simple way to begin. The teacher should also think of other students as resources. One fourth grade teacher reported that each year she undertook an elaborate craft project with her students and that it was always chaotic -- she found herself being called for help in 20 directions, students became frustrated, and she always ended the project feeling frazzled. After an introductory course in cooperative learning, she implemented a surprisingly simple but greatly underutilized solution: she used a recess period to teach the craft project to six students, and the next day, these students were the resident teachers/experts for all the other students at their table. The project went smoothly, the young teachers felt important and powerful, and all the students felt satisfied. Another teacher, of first graders, got a new record player for her room and was anxious for all the students to learn how to use it properly. Rather than holding a large group lesson, she chose one student and taught him the correct terms (tone arm, spindle, turntable) and utilization of the record player. After she had checked him out on a skills list, he was asked to teach two other

students, who then each taught two more until the entire class had received personalized instruction and been checked-off on the skills list.

Encourage Students to Notice Each Other's Accomplishments

In most classrooms, students are attentive to every misdeed and misstep of their classmates, often resulting in tattling, blame, and recriminations. The teacher should try turning around this natural inclination to notice by refocusing the attention to positive acts and achievements. One teacher posted a "Good Deed Tree" in her room and instructed students that any time they saw anyone do or say something nice to another student they were to write their report on a small slip of paper and post it on the tree. On Fridays, the teacher read the notes on the tree, providing positive feedback both to the student who had done something nice and to the student who had noticed. At Christmas time, some teachers implement a Secret Santa program in which students pick the name of another student for whom they do "secret" nice things, leave messages, and so forth. Such a project could be extended for the whole year, encouraging students to be supportive of one another all year long. Additionally, when a student accomplishes something, anything -- an improved spelling paper, a difficult math assignment, making friends with a former enemy, learning to ride a bicycle--that student should be encouraged to share this with the class, promoting group applause, cheers, or other expressions of support. It needs to be made clear that since it is not a competitive class, everyone can succeed and everyone can be happy for other people's accomplishments without being personally diminished.

Use Children's Literature to Teach About Cooperation

Children's books can provide an excellent way to teach children cooperative skills (Sapon-Shevin, 1986). Teachers can select and read books that have cooperation and/or conflict resolution as a theme and can then extend the book by discussing personal and classroom applications of the book's message. For example, the book, *Two Good Friends* (Dalton, 1974), is about Bear and Duck who are good friends although they are very different. Duck is a meticulous housekeeper with a home that is always clean and neat, but he often has no food in the house. Bear, however, is an excellent cook but a terrible housekeeper, and his house is always dirty. After some initial difficulties in reconciling their differences, they reach a perfect solution: Duck cleans Bear's house for him and Bear bakes delicious things for Duck to eat. Teachers can use this book, and others like it, to begin a discussion of the tremendous variations in talents and skills of class members and ways in which they can support each other. If Bill is wonderful at jump rope but has trouble remembering things (like his homework), perhaps he could give other students jump rope lessons and someone else could remind him to take his books home every day after school. For older students, a book such as *The Blind Man and the Elephant: An Old Tale from the Land of India* (Quigley, 1959) can be the discussion starter for an exploration of the idea that each individual has some information and skills, but that only by working together can the "whole picture" be seen or the best solution devised. Classes can also be encouraged to write their own "Classroom Book of Cooperation" in which they record the things they have accomplished as a class that would not have been possible without collaboration. For younger students, the book might be called "It Takes Two. . ." and could be a picture book with teacher captions. Older students might want to incorporate collaborative writing to produce short stories or poems about cooperation. For more extensive examples of ways for creating overall cooperative classroom environments, see Dishon and O'Leary (1984), Moorman and Dishon (1983), and Prutzman, Burger, Bodenhamer, and Stern (1978).

III. IMPLEMENTING COOPERATIVE LEARNING GROUPS

In addition to the more generalized, informal approaches described above, teachers wishing to structure cooperative learning in their classrooms can use one or more of the more structured models of cooperative learning. This section discusses two of these, *Small Group Learning* (Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, & Roy, 1984; Sharan & Sharan, 1976) and *the Jigsaw Method* (Aronson, 1978). These are examples of systematic ways of restructuring academic curricula through the use of cooperative learning techniques. The strengths of these models is their comprehensiveness and their adaptability to various subject areas and ages/abilities.

Small Group Learning

Perhaps the most well-known cooperative learning model is the one developed by Johnson and Johnson (1975) usually called Learning Together. In this model, the teacher assigns heterogeneous groups to work on a single product or project as a group, following specific guidelines from the teacher. The teacher's role consists of assigning students to heterogeneous groups, arranging the classroom to facilitate peer interaction, providing the appropriate materials, explaining the task and the cooperative goal structure to the students, observing the student-student interaction, intervening as needed, and evaluating the group products using a criterion-referenced evaluation system. Group members are trained to observe and monitor the social interactions within their own group, and one member, playing the role of "observer," provides feedback to the group concerning the extent to which they engaged in various behaviors, including praising one another, asking questions, clarifying others' statements, giving direction to the group, and so on.

This model can be used with virtually any subject matter or age level. For example, first graders might be grouped and asked to write a sentence together, each member being held accountable for all others in the group being able to read the sentence. A group of high school students might be given information on automobile

prices, family income, insurance rates, and loan opportunities, and be asked to come up with a car that a family could afford, how it might be financed, and what the monthly payments would be.

In order for group learning of this kind to be successful there must be individual accountability, some way of monitoring and ensuring that all group members are participating and not simply going along with the answer or product of one or more group members. Careful attention must also be given to teaching the necessary social skills. Rather than assuming that students come to school able to listen, praise, compromise, and negotiate conflict (or bemoaning students' lack of skills in these areas), the teacher must take as his or her responsibility the establishment and improvement of students' interpersonal behavioral skills, providing careful, systematic instruction and feedback of those behaviors necessary for smooth group functioning. One way of structuring and teaching the various social skills necessary for group cooperation is to assign students to various roles within the group; one student might be given the role of observer, one the role of leader, one the role of checker, and one the role of praiser. Each of these roles would be explained and taught and then rotated among group members so that, in time, all students have gotten the opportunity to practice all the different roles.

Sharan and Sharan's (1976) Group-Investigation model involves two to six students working in groups on subtopics that are part of a general area delineated by the teacher. For example, if the students are studying Mexico, one group might investigate the music of Mexico, another group the geography of the area, another group Mexican food, and another group the political system of Mexico. Teachers and students cooperatively plan the goals and expected outcomes of the group, and each group works together on a project that is subsequently presented to the class as a whole. The method stresses having students share their individual perspectives with the group as a whole and having groups broaden the perspective of the whole class through their presentations. This kind of multilevel teaching is particularly conducive to accommodating a range of individual differences within a single class. In one class, a student who was labeled as severely handicapped contributed to the unit on Mexico by planning, shopping for, and preparing a Mexican dinner for the class. This endeavor was consistent with the individual goals of this student (shopping skills, money management, and food preparation), and yet allowed the student to participate as a member of the group and to engage in an activity (making food) that was well appreciated by all the students.

The Jigsaw Method

In the Jigsaw Method (Aronson, 1978; Kagan, 1985), students are assigned to five or six-member teams; the material to be learned is divided into six parts, and each student is responsible for learning and then teaching one part of the material to each of his or her members. Members of different groups who have been assigned to the same section of material meet in "expert" groups to study their sections and become comfortable with their responsibility for teaching their fragment. Each group member is tested on all of the material, so that there is forced interdependence between group members. "Not liking someone," or "thinking that someone looks funny or talks funny," are not reasons for failing to learn or teach one's portion of the material.

As with the other approaches described above, this technique can be applied to a range of subject matters. In one third grade class, students became experts on different parts of pizza -- green pepper experts, pepperoni experts, crust experts, and sauce experts. Students learned something about their ingredient, how to prepare it for pizza, and what nutritional value it had. They then returned to their groups and taught other group members what they had learned and assembled and ate their pizza! (NA. Graves & T. Graves, personal communication, October 23, 1986).

Older students can utilize this technique with written material, each group learning a small section of a chapter, becoming experts on one character in a play, or learning 4 of 20 vocabulary words before returning to teach these to their group. This technique was originally utilized to mitigate the problems and tensions that had developed between students of different racial groups following desegregation, but it has broad applicability in any setting, particularly those in which students are "cliquish" or avoid others whom they perceive as different.

All of these approaches to cooperative learning require sustained observation and teaching of the skills necessary for successful cooperation. The teacher cannot simply put students in groups, ask them to cooperate, and then hope for the best. He or she must plan carefully what kind of interdependence is structured or demanded by the task, monitor individuals' and groups' skills in behaving cooperatively, help students to understand and process their own cooperative skills, and then specifically teach those skills that are absent or inadequately displayed. For example, a teacher might conduct a lesson on listening, involving students in practicing active listening (listening without interrupting, commenting, or judging). If the teacher notices that students have difficulty providing feedback in kind and helpful ways (i.e., "No, you jerk, the answer isn't 12"), then he or she might engage the students in a lesson or discussion of ways of disagreeing without insulting, ways of resolving conflicts by learning to restate the other person's position, and so on. (See Kreidler [1984] for excellent activities for establishing conflict resolution skills in the classroom.)

As cooperative learning methods become more popular and materials and training workshops in this area proliferate, it is important that teachers become critical consumers of programs and activities that are labeled as "cooperative learning." There are tremendous differences in the extent to which such programs are actually cooperative (as opposed to promoting intragroup cooperation with intergroup competition) and the extent to which they actually empower students and teachers to make their own decisions about curriculum, classroom management, and the development of interpersonal skills. *Cooperative Learning, Cooperative Lives* (Schniedewind & Davidson, 1987) provides an excellent model of helping teachers to use the process of

cooperation to think about and teach cooperation and competition within the classroom, the community, the country, and the world.

IV. CONCLUSION

There are many ways in which teachers can encourage their students to see themselves as a supportive community; cooperative learning and cooperation are basic principles in establishing a sense of mutual responsibility and caring for other people. Teachers wishing to find out more about cooperative learning are encouraged to join the international Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education (136 Liberty Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95060) and to check resource guides such as the one issued periodically by Graves and Graves (1985, 1987).

Within cooperative settings, students can be supportive of other students who do things differently; the child who talks more slowly, who struggles with language, or who needs his or her fingers in order to count can all be included in the activity because the goal is to get something accomplished, not to do something before someone else or without any support or help. Within cooperative settings, helping people is valued, appreciated, and taught rather than labelled as "cheating" or inappropriate socializing. Students see that praise is not a scarce commodity rationed by the teacher, and so they are free to praise each other. They see that success is not limited to a single student or group, and so they can be supportive of one another's accomplishments.

Cooperative environments nourish and celebrate diversity, epitomizing the poster that reads, "None of us is as smart as all of us." The film "Nicky, One of My Best Friends" (1975), tells the story of a child with cerebral palsy and blindness who is an integrated part of a cooperative classroom. One of Nicky's friends says, "I don't think of Nicky as handicapped. He just needs a little help. We all do." Cooperative learning allows teachers to draw out the best behavior of their students; the most nurturing, supportive, and caring tendencies are nourished and encouraged in cooperative environments.

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