

On Cooperation in Schools: A Conversation with David and Roger Johnson

Roger Johnson

David and Roger Johnson, articulate proponents of cooperative learning and authors of ASCD's popular *Circles of Learning*, believe that developing cooperative structures at all levels will contribute to overall effectiveness in a district.



For several years the two of you have promoted cooperative learning among students. Now there seems to be a trend toward more cooperation at the professional level.

David: Yes, we're seeing not only more cooperative learning in classrooms, but collegial support groups of teachers and administrators at the building, and sometimes the district, level. Cooperation needs to start at the classroom level because that determines the organizational climate and atmosphere in the district. If teachers spend five to seven hours a day advocating a competitive, individualistic approach—telling students, "Do your own work. Don't talk to your neighbor, don't share, don't help, don't care about each other; just try to be better," those are the values the teachers are going to have in their relationships with colleagues and their administrators.

On the other hand, if teachers spend five to seven hours a day saying, "Help each other. Share, work together, discuss the material, explain," and make it clear that "you're responsible not only for your own learning but for the learning of your peers"—if they promote cooperation among students—they will look at their colleagues as potential cooperators.

How widespread is cooperative learning at the classroom level?

Roger: In certain areas it's getting very popular: on the East and West

David Johnson



coasts—in California especially—and in parts of the Midwest. It's taking hold primarily in suburban upper-middle-class advanced districts, where parents want their children to do well in college.

So parents support it?

Roger: Yes, especially upper-middle-class parents. For example, when I talked to a PTA in a suburban district in the New York area a couple of years ago, a father stood up and said, "I know exactly what you're talking about: it's management training, the same thing we're getting at the First Bank. You mean my kid learns math and gets management training at the same time?" The parents in that district see cooperative learning as a bonus because their children are getting the training in leadership, group decision making, and conflict management they'll need to be successful in later life.

But is there evidence that cooperative learning in fact pays off?

David: Yes. If there's any one educational technique that has firm empirical support, it's cooperative learning. The research in this area is the oldest research tradition in American social psychology. The first study was done in 1897; we've had 90 years of research, hundreds of studies. There is probably more evidence validating the use of cooperative learning than there is for any other aspect of education—more than for lecturing, age grouping, starting reading at age six, departmentalization, or the 50-minute period. And the research applies as much to teachers as it does to students.

There's research on that as well?

David: Yes, in fact most of the work done up to 1970 was on adult cooperation; it was only in the '70s that much research was done in elementary and secondary schools. But from both types of studies it's clear that cooperation increases productivity. At the adult level, cooperation among adult teachers increases teaching effectiveness, while at the classroom level, cooperation increases each individual student's achievement.

"What you want for every child—but especially for those with a lot of ability—is a cheering section urging that student to work to maximal capacity."

There are two possible bases for making those kinds of statements. One is to infer that findings of research done in other settings apply to schools. Madeline Hunter has done that very well with the psychological research on learning. Another way is to apply the research in the new situation and test whether it actually produces the intended effects. Which approach are you citing?

David: Both. We believe the first requirement for a good school practice is a solid theory. The theory for cooperation was developed by Morton Deutsch in the late 1940s. Second, you need research to validate the theory, to determine the conditions under which it's valid, and so on. Third, you have to operationalize it so it can be used in practice. That's basically an engineering issue; if the theory is valid, it's a matter of varying and modifying the system until it works in the classroom and school the way the theory says it should.

There's been a lot of theoretical research establishing that cooperative learning *should* work. I suppose that's the Madeline Hunter approach, and actually it's our approach too. We say, "Here's a conceptual system; now look at the characteristics of your situation, of your group of students, and design a system that works in your classroom with your students." But other researchers—such as Spencer Kagan at Riverside, California; Schlomo Sharan in Israel; David Devries and Robert Slavin at Johns Hopkins—have developed detailed curriculum approaches and have tested and validated them.

One reason I would expect cooperative learning to be effective is its use of positive peer pressure. In conventional school organization, peer pressure seems to restrict students' learning.

Roger: Yes. What you want for every child—but especially for those with a lot of ability—is a cheering section urging that student to work to maximal capacity. You can have high, medium, and low kids in the same group with the low kid cheering the high one on and saying, "Rene, we need you to top out the test and get an absolutely perfect score, so don't watch TV tonight, study!" And you can get the high kid saying to the low kid, "Look, if you get six right we're okay. Last week you only had three, but you've really got to get up to six. I'm behind you all the way." The cooperative system encourages everybody to work to top capacity.

David: And the same is true at the building level with teachers. What you want is teachers cheering each other on so that if a teacher has a particular strength or plans a new unit or comes in with new materials, the other teachers say, "That's terrific."

So there's evidence that cooperative learning is effective—but as we all know, that doesn't necessarily mean that schools will use it. For teachers to use it, research evidence probably is not enough. It has to pay off for them with kids in a way they consider beneficial.

Roger: When teachers use cooperative learning they get a whole variety of outcomes. Achievement goes up—for high, medium, and low students—but they also get higher-level processing, deeper-level understanding, critical thinking, and long-term retention. When students get engaged in discussing material and explaining it to each other, their brains respond differently than if they were only reading and listening.

But another plus is a sense of interdependence. Students learn to care about and get committed to each other's success as well as their own. In a competitive classroom, students really have a stake in other students' failure. The worse other students do, the easier it is to get an A. In an individualistic classroom, students have no stake in other students whatsoever. Each student works independently on his or her own against set criteria. What happens to others is irrelevant. Within a cooperative group students have a vested interest in making sure that other people do well. They start to celebrate when other people learn. Anything they can do to help their groupmates learn the material better, retain it longer, get a better grade on the test, benefits them too. That produces committed relationships in which students really care about each other and provide assistance and help when needed. It promotes more positive peer relationships, better social skills, more social support, and, partly for that reason, higher self-esteem. Students like the class better, they like school better, they're more interested in the subject.

You mentioned social support. Why is that so important?

Roger: In today's schools we're expecting more and more of students and staff. When there's an increase in pressure, there should be an increase in social support at the same time. When students are expected to learn more complex material faster and more thoroughly, they need more social support. When teachers are told to work harder or do a better job, they should have lots of social support.

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David: As a psychotherapist I may talk with someone who says, “One of my parents just died, I have a child in the hospital in critical condition, my spouse just left with all the money, and I’m destitute”; but if that person has a set of caring, committed friends that he or she can confide in and talk to, the person may be coping better than an isolated, alienated person who has only—say, lost his job. The point is that the ability to cope is determined not by the amount of stress a person is under, but by the balance between the stress and the support. And much of that support has to come from peers. In the classroom that means other students. In the school it means there must be strong, caring, supportive relationships among teachers. There’s no alternative.

In ASCD our emphasis has long been on supervision. We assume that the principal or some other official person is responsible—

David: Yes, but the supervisor’s job is not to be the support system but to manage the support system. A supervisor can’t provide all the support and caring that a teacher needs on a day-to-day, minute-by-minute basis. A principal can’t be in every teacher’s classroom two or three times a day providing help. A colleague can.

I’m sure it’s true that a supervisor can’t do it all, but now there are moves to create middle-level roles for teachers: mentor teachers and so on. Even leaders of teacher organizations are in favor of having “lead teachers.”

David: From the research in social psychology I have to say that such differentiation is a mistake. It’s based on a parental model that, to be meaningful, social support and assistance have to come from your superior. Good, constructive, helpful, committed support can come from peers and subordinates as well as from superiors. And in many ways it’s better coming from peers than from anyone else.

That may be true, but you also know how important it is in this society to make teaching a more prestigious and rewarding profession, and these programs offer promise of doing that.

David: I can only advise that if a district decides to have master teachers, one of the main criteria for their selection should be the ability to establish collegial relationships with other teachers. I believe that creating hierarchies among teachers can create divisiveness. What most principals want is a cooperative staff that pulls together.

Let’s get back to the classroom level. What does it take to make cooperative learning work?

Roger: Five basic elements. The first is what we call “positive interdependence.” The students really have to believe they’re in it together, sink or swim. They have to care about each other’s learning.

Second is a lot of verbal, face-to-face interaction. Students have to explain, argue, elaborate, and tie in the materi-

al they learn today with what they had last week.

The third element is individual accountability. It must be clear that every member of the group has to learn, that there's no hitchhiking. No one can sit on the outside and let others do the work; everyone has to be in there pulling his or her own weight.

The fourth element is social skills. Students need to be taught appropriate leadership, communication, trust building, and conflict resolution skills so they can operate effectively. To say it slightly differently, if students have not developed social skills, a lot of the benefits of cooperative learning are lost.

The fifth element is what we call "group processing." Periodically the groups have to assess how well they are working together and how they could do even better.

Getting all that to happen surely isn't easy. We have a history of innovations of one sort or another in schools that can be sustained for a few years by asking teachers to work extra hard. Eventually people wear out and the innovation disappears. Is cooperative learning like that?

Roger: I don't think so. Let me explain why. A workshop or course teaches teachers *about* cooperative learning, but it doesn't teach them *how* to do it. The only way teachers can learn the "how" is in their own classrooms, doing it. That means there must be a support system to provide advice and assistance when the teacher needs it. If a teacher goes to a workshop, goes back to the classroom and has no support, then the first time the approach doesn't work, the teacher will drop it and go back to what he or she was doing before. When that happens, the money and effort invested in the workshop have been wasted.

David: The best support system, obviously, is colleagues. So if you train a team of three, four, or five teachers from the same building, they get established as a collegial support group to sustain one another's efforts; and there's a very good chance that cooperative learning will be there forever.

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I can see that an administrator might encourage teachers to attend cooperative learning training; but many administrators would probably be reluctant to do more than that. We generally think of classroom organization as a matter for teachers to decide for themselves without outside interference.

David: Insisting that teachers use cooperative learning certainly wouldn't work and would be inconsistent with the ultimate purpose. Roger and I like a "grassroots up" system; we first give a general awareness presentation on cooperative learning to the whole staff—building or district. Then we begin working with some of the better teachers who get interested and volunteer, training them as a team and building a collegial support group within the building. After that we train new groups in concentric circles: teachers are sent by their colleagues so they can get started doing cooperative learning and join one of the collegial groups.

The principal may want every teacher in the building to be involved in a support group, but we know that to be successful such groups must have a clear purpose, and they must be help-

ful to teachers in a day-to-day, nitty-gritty way. So a focus on learning to use cooperative learning is a reason for having support groups that teachers can buy into.

If eventually every teacher in the building is a member of such a group, the principal can then run the building the same way a teacher runs a cooperative classroom. His or her responsibility is to make sure that the support groups have those same five elements. Again they are—first, positive interdependence: the teachers care about each other's productivity and well-being. Second, a lot of face-to-face interaction among the teachers: they talk to each other about professional practice. Third, individual accountability: no freeloading or hitchhiking. Fourth, the teachers have the social skills, the leadership, the group decision making, the conflict management skills they need in order to operate together. And fifth, that periodically the teams review how well they are doing.

You mentioned the need for teachers to have group process skills. That can't be taken for granted.

Roger: No. A critical moment of truth in a collegial support group is when two teachers disagree strongly with each other and argue. Within an organizational climate that's primarily competitive or individualistic, such conflicts turn very destructive: teachers feel angry toward each other, they avoid each other, there's a lot of acrimony and divisiveness among the staff.

When teachers in a cooperative group disagree, they must have the skills to manage the conflict constructively. So the issue becomes: How do you teach teachers the basic collaborative skills they need to be good colleagues? There are two approaches, one direct and the other indirect. We prefer the indirect: by teaching their students how to provide leadership for the learning groups—how to disagree in constructive and helpful ways, how to build and maintain trust within the learning group, how to make group decisions—the teachers learn those social skills themselves and see when and how they should be used with their colleagues.

Our experience has been that if you just walk in on a faculty and say, "We're going to teach you how to resolve conflicts better," many teachers don't see the need for it. They think, "I seldom talk to my colleagues. Why do I need to know how to resolve conflicts?" The same is true at the principal-principal level, by the way. When principals begin running collegial support groups within their buildings, ensuring that teachers have the collaborative skills they need to be good colleagues, they begin to look at other principals differently. And in training teachers how to collaborate effectively the principals develop skills themselves to use with their colleagues. This is important because it's not unusual in many school districts for superintendents to place principals in direct competition with each other. A superintendent may say, "There are five elementary schools, but we have only three special ed. teachers. Every-

body write a proposal; the three best proposals will get the special ed. teachers." In that situation it is in each principal's best interest that other principals do poorly.

If the superintendent wants to build more collegiality among principals, more peer support, he or she does it with the five basic elements: deliberately structure sink-or-swim-together, get a lot of face-to-face interaction among principals in small decision-making groups, have clear individual accountability, make sure the social skills are there, and make sure that the groups think constructively about how well they are operating and how they might do better in the future.

So those five elements apply at every level?

David: Yes. And where a district builds that structure—cooperative learning in classrooms, collegial teacher support groups in buildings, colle-

gial administrative relationships within the district—the whole school district functions better: morale goes way up, absenteeism and divisiveness go down. People are more committed, have more energy for their jobs, there are all sorts of positive outcomes. And it puts student cooperative learning in the appropriate context. □

Reference

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