

Cooperation Works!

Cooperative learning can benefit all students, even those who are low-achieving, gifted, or mainstreamed.

With a combined total of 48 years in the classroom and 23 years using cooperative learning strategies, we are confident that cooperation works: it promotes higher achievement, develops social skills, and puts the responsibility for learning on the learner.

The three of us come from the ranks of the more than 30,000 teachers trained by Roger and David Johnson in the Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota. We have used cooperative learning in our 3rd, 4th, and 6th grade classrooms for many years, as do many of the teachers in our open-space elementary school. We also collaborate to train other teachers throughout the state of Minnesota in the use of the Johnsons' cooperative learning model.

Effects on Achievement

Each year, as we use cooperative learning in our own classrooms, we see improved achievement in a variety of curriculum areas. For example, Kristin has used heterogeneous cooperative groups in 3rd grade spelling for more than 10 years, and individual and class spelling scores have improved consistently over that time (see "Cooperative Spelling Groups").

In one case, Andy, a low-achieving student who received LD services, was failing social studies, health, and lan-

guage early in the year. He needed constant supervision just to stay on task, paid little attention to classroom discussions, and seldom completed assignments. With a cooperative group to support and encourage him, however, Andy completed many assignments during class and brought back homework consistently. Soon he earned a "B" in health, a "C" in lan-

guage, and his social studies average went up markedly. By mid-February, he was passing every subject; and he was able to maintain his grades for the rest of the year. From a dejected, isolated child at the beginning of the year, Andy became a cheerful, confident child whose achievement had improved dramatically by the end of the year.





Teachers Dianne Augustine, Kristin Gruber, and Lynda Hanson (left to right) believe strongly in the cooperative concept. They apply it in their work together and individually in their 6th (opposite page), 3rd (center), and 4th grade (right) classrooms at Dayton Elementary School in Minnesota.

Mainstreamed Students

Many mainstreamed students lack social skills and have low self-esteem. When they are placed in small heterogeneous cooperative groups and assigned specific roles, their achievement generally increases and their psychological health improves.

In one instance, Dianne placed Susan, a mainstreamed child, in a co-

Photographs by Eric Augustine



Cooperative Spelling Groups

Here is a procedure we recommend for using cooperative groups to teach spelling.

First, in order to collect data on individual spelling abilities, teach spelling in a traditional individualistic setting for three or four weeks. Then form heterogeneous triads including one high-, one average-, and one low-scoring speller. Triads then work together to study spelling for the rest of the year in the following fashion:

Day 1—Pretest. As teams sit together to take the pretest, they reach consensus on how to spell each word. Teams self-correct their pretests and note any troublesome words.

Day 2—Spelling games and activities. Teams choose from a variety of activities to study the unit words. For example, if teams "jigsaw" the words (Aronson et al. 1978), they divide word cards for the spelling unit equally among team members. Each student is responsible for studying his or her words and devising a strategy to teach the others how to remember those words.

Any spelling games or activities are appropriate—as long as the students perceive a group goal. Everyone must learn to spell all the words, and everyone must understand that she or he will be held individually accountable on the test.

Day 3—Practice test. Teams spend 5 minutes coaching each other in preparation for the test. Students take the practice test individually. After the test, teams reconvene (without pencils) to compare test papers. Teams tutor teammates who have misspelled words, then celebrate accurate papers.

Day 4—Study or free day. If all team members within a team have accurate practice tests, that team earns free time. If any team member(s) misspelled a word, the entire team uses this time to tutor the student(s).

Day 5—Final test. Teams spend 5 minutes coaching members who misspelled words on the practice test. These students retake the test individually. After the test, the entire team reconvenes (without pencils) to check test papers and praise each other's work.

Teams in which every member masters his or her required number of words receive a reward. If one team member fails to reach mastery, the team does not earn the reward. This reward system promotes positive interdependence: a feeling of "we're in this together, sink or swim" (Johnson et al. 1988). The combination of peer pressure and peer support creates an environment where students feel accountable to each other for learning spelling. In this motivated atmosphere, individual spelling scores have always improved in our classes—in some cases increasing from 40 percent accuracy to 100 percent accuracy.

—Dianne K. Augustine, Kristin D. Gruber, and Lynda R. Hanson

When mainstreamed students are placed in small cooperative groups, their achievement generally increases and their psychological health improves.

operative group to prepare for a social studies chapter test. The children understood that each member of the group needed to do well on the test: the group score would be the average of their four individual scores. Susan was having difficulty learning the information for her modified test. When the study time was over and Susan still had not mastered the material, her group members asked if they could stay in during recess to work with her until she was prepared. The next day, Dianne observed them quizzing Susan as soon as she arrived at school. When the tests were corrected, Susan and her teammates all received 100 percent. The children shouted for joy and complimented each other on their success.

Angela learned to be tactful with her classmates and made significant progress in sharing ideas and respecting others' opinions.

Gifted Students

Of course, gifted students and their parents are often skeptical of the benefits of cooperation. Let's look at a few situations that occurred in Lynda's 4th grade "gifted cluster" classroom.

Lynda's classroom is divided into five base groups. There are three pairs of students in each group. Lynda chooses the pairs very carefully, putting a high-achieving student with a lower-achieving student. Because students are paired, when an assignment is structured cooperatively, there are ready-made partners. Or Lynda can divide the six members of each base group into two triads, with heterogeneity assured. The base groups are kept together four to five weeks before being reassigned.

Some very unlikely friendships have come out of these partnerships. In one instance, Amy, a gifted student, and Scott, an average student, were assigned to one another. Theirs was a rocky relationship from the start. They insisted they hated each other, couldn't possibly work together, and even if they could, they wouldn't. Lynda decided to leave the pair together for an extended period.

Leaving pairs together has proved a very effective way of dealing with reluctant partners. The two students involved may not become the best of friends, but that's not necessary. Almost always, however, they develop respect for each other and an awareness of how to work together. Amy

and Scott became good friends. When Scott's family moved during the third quarter of the year, Amy was so upset she cried.

In another case, Angela, a gifted student, had always enjoyed school immensely. Early in the year, however, her parents contacted the school to question why Angela was being put into groups in which each person was dependent on the others to complete assignments. Angela was upset by these groups. She knew she could do the work faster alone. The parents' first concern was Angela's unhappiness. Why was she having trouble?

Lynda explained that Angela was having problems interacting with others when working in a cooperative pair or triad. Angela's father observed that Angela had always been successful at everything she'd attempted: she was a superior student and was outstanding in piano, gymnastics, and dance. But Angela had never found it necessary to work *with* anyone. He thought Angela had discovered something she did not excel at, and it made her uncomfortable. The parents agreed it would be to their daughter's benefit to learn how to interact in a positive way, even though she could admittedly do the assignments alone. They were also enthusiastic about the critical thinking the groups stimulated. They assured Lynda they would support her efforts; then they let Angela know they thought success in cooperative groups was important. As a result, Angela learned to be tactful with her classmates and made significant progress in sharing ideas and respecting others' ideas and opinions.

Jenny, another high-achieving student, was concerned that her grades might suffer because of the group work. Lynda offered to delete the cooperative scores from Jenny's average and give her the average of her individual scores. The results surprised both Jenny and her parents. Her average with all included was 97 percent, while her individual average, excluding the cooperative scores, was only 96 percent. (This is a typical result. Very seldom do cooperative assignments have a negative effect on student averages.)

But Jenny was uncomfortable with group work. When someone disagreed with her answer, she was afraid to speak up, fearing she might hurt their feelings. She simply allowed an incorrect answer to be recorded. Jenny's parents had originally asked that their daughter be excluded from cooperative groups because the experience was too traumatic for her. Eventually, however, they supported cooperative groups and agreed that being assertive enough to explain one's answers and stand up for one's point of view was a valuable skill to develop. Jenny learned, in the context of a cooperative group, to manage conflicts within her group more effectively.

Dramatic Changes

Implementing cooperative learning has dramatically changed our perception of teaching and learning. We now expect to see students in small heterogeneous groups discussing topics, using effective social skills, and—what's most important—caring about

each other's learning.

If other educators believe as we do that higher achievement, increased acceptance of differences, improved attitudes toward school, and enhanced self-esteem are valuable goals for all children, then we all need to promote the continued use of cooperative learning. □

References

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