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GUEST EDITORIAL

HERE TO STAY—OR GONE TOMORROW?

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Cooperative learning seems to be an extraordinary success. It has an excellent research base, many viable and successful forms, and hundreds of thousands of enthusiastic adherents. Yet every innovation in education carries within it the seeds of its own downfall, and cooperative learning is no different in this regard.

One danger inherent in the widespread adoption of cooperative learning is that large numbers of teachers with half-knowledge may use ineffective forms of the approach and experience failure and frustration. Cooperative learning appeals particularly to humanistic teachers who feel uncomfortable with a great deal of structure and with providing rewards or other "extrinsic" incentives to students. Yet research consistently finds that the successful forms of cooperative learning are those that provide a good deal of structure as well as rewards or recognition based on group performance.

At worst, some teachers hear about cooperative learning and believe that students can simply be placed in groups, given some interesting materials or problems to solve, and allowed to discover information or skills. Others may allow groups to work together to produce a single product or solution. Research clearly does not support either of these uses of the approach. Successful models always include plain old good instruction; the cooperative activities *supplement* but do not replace direct instruction (what they do replace is individual seatwork). Moreover, they always include individual accountability, in that group success depends on the sum of all group members' quiz scores or particular contributions to a team task.

Another danger inherent in the success of cooperative learning is that the methods will be oversold and undertrained. It is being promoted as an alternative to tracking and within-class grouping, as a means of mainstreaming academically handicapped students, as a means of improving race relations in desegregated schools, as a solution to the problems of students at risk, as a means of increasing prosocial behavior among children, as well as a method for simply increasing the achievement of all students. Cooperative learning can in fact accomplish this staggering array of objectives, but not as a result of a single three-hour inservice session.

Real and lasting success with the approach requires in-class follow-up over time from peer coaches or expert

coaches, unambiguous administrative support, and the availability of materials designed for cooperative learning or time to adapt existing materials to this purpose. It also requires using the right methods for the right objectives. For example, Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD) and Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT) are excellent for teaching skills or objectives with one right answer, from calculus to spelling to geography (Slavin 1986). I'm often depressed, however, to see these methods applied to subjects that lend themselves more to discussion and controversy.

The future of cooperative learning is difficult to predict. My hope is that even when cooperative learning is no longer the "hot" new method, schools and teachers will continue to use it as a routine part of instruction. My fear is that cooperative learning will largely disappear as a result of the faddism so common in American education.

However, I have several reasons to believe that cooperative learning is here to stay. First, it has a vastly better research base than most innovations, so it is likely to be found successful when school districts evaluate it. Second, the nature of cooperative learning makes it a method unlikely to be forced on unwilling teachers. Making mandatory such methods as mastery learning and Madeline Hunter's models, for example, has probably undermined the longevity of these methods. Third, cooperative learning appears to be becoming a standard element of preservice education, so a generation of teachers is likely to have been exposed to the idea. Finally, cooperative learning makes life more pleasant for teachers as well as for students. Students love to work together, and their enthusiasm makes teaching more fun. Long after something else is the novelty, teachers will continue to use cooperative methods because they can see the effects with their own eyes. □

Reference

Slavin, R.E. (1986). *Using Student Team Learning*. 3rd ed. Baltimore, Md.: Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, The Johns Hopkins University.

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