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## Cooperative learning: A way to build social skills into classroom instruction without jeopardizing achievement

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## Cooperative learning: A way to build social skills into classroom instruction without jeopardizing achievement

### Abstract

Over the years there has developed a dilemma between instructional strategies that promote achievement and instructional strategies that promote social development. 1 The primary aim of schools is to prepare students for success in careers and adult responsibilities. An assumption is made that students will be able to successfully apply what they learn in school to future situations.

Cooperative Learning: A Way To Build Social Skills  
Into Classroom Instruction Without Jeopardizing Achievement

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Master of Arts in Education

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by

Barbara Elaine Moine

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Entitled: COOPERATIVE LEARNING: A WAY TO BUILD SOCIAL SKILLS  
INTO CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION WITHOUT JEOPARDIZING ACHIEVEMENT

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement  
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Over the years there has developed a dilemma between instructional strategies that promote achievement and instructional strategies that promote social development. The primary aim of schools is to prepare students for success in careers and adult responsibilities. An assumption is made that students will be able to successfully apply what they learn in school to future situations.

In many instances educators must choose between strategies that promote achievement and those promoting social development. Since the "back to basics" philosophy of the late 1960's achievement has been a dominating force. It has become apparent in recent years that the work force is in need of psychologically well-adjusted individuals. Our society is moving toward more service based employment and our country relies more on people than on machines. Approximately 80% of all occupations will be service and information related in the future (Rhoades, 1985). It is of little value to train a person if they can't work effectively with others. Students need to develop an ability to perceive a meaningful interdependence with other people. Our educational system needs to consider the development of skills that will result in positive interpersonal relationships.

All humans have basic needs. Among those needs is that of belonging (Glasser, 1988). This need does not turn off

when a student enters the classroom. Meeting this need of acceptance by others coincides with developing an ability to accept others.

The development of our society today indicates that this essential need is not being met in many lives. A substantial number of children and teens feel isolated (D. Johnson, 1984). They feel out of touch with the rest of society. This results in little motivation to contribute to the well being of others or of society. This was indicated in the 1960's and 1970's with an increase in frequency of serious crimes against property involving juveniles. There has been a rise of more than 250% in the suicide rate among teenagers and 150% among children 5 to 14 years of age over the past 20 years (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). Changes have occurred in the family unit through divorce. Twice as many students live in single parent homes compared to 20 years ago. Latchkey children are commonplace now due to an increase in the number of homes involving both parents working.

The structure of the schools today has also endured a reduction of close relations. In the past twenty years schools have become larger and to varying degrees have developed an impersonal formality. Due to social changes and career demands teachers have become less accessible. Over 85% of instruction consists of lectures, seatwork, and competition (Johnson,

1984). Students have been kept isolated and forbidden to interact.

Society cannot afford to continue to have a significant number of students who are developing a feeling of alienation and disconnection from their peers. Schools can't graduate students with little or no ability to interact effectively with others--a prime requisite of the world of work.

Teachers need to find ways in class to give students chances to associate with others in friendly ways and do this as a planned part of learning. It has been shown in many studies that working together cooperatively transfers to other situations than the classroom (Hertz-Lazorwitz, 1980).

Results of much research indicates that cooperative learning has been shown to enhance social relationships. Students will learn to work together if they have an opportunity to practice such a skill. In a synthesis of research on cooperative learning, Robert Slavin (1981) states that the principles of cooperative learning have proven practical and acceptable to teachers. Not only have gains been indicated in achievement but also in the development of social skills. He suggests that cooperative learning methods can be used by teachers to achieve social and academic goals at the same time, without sacrificing one for the other.

Blaney (1977) defines cooperative learning as interaction in which individuals experience the same outcome. If one person obtains his goal, then others in the cooperative group obtain their goals as well. Research indicates that when students are working together toward a common goal, academic work becomes an activity valued by peers (Slavin, 1987). This can be related by the hard work involved in team sports. A team member's success is valued by peers because it brings credit to the team much the same as academic success of one individual reflects success on the entire cooperative team.

In a cooperative learning situation the social skills students need in order to work collaboratively such as leadership, ability to communicate, to trust one another, and to manage conflict are directly taught (Johnson, 1984). A positive interdependence is established within the small groups through the development of mutual goals that are derived from a division of labor among the team members as well as that of materials, resources, and information. Cooperative members of a team are lead to realize that the assignment of different roles within a group still results in joint rewards.

The experiences that students involved in cooperative learning have dealt with indicate a promotion of greater interpersonal attraction among homogeneous students. This feeling is a result of the benefit they realize from helping



each other learn. The face to face interaction among group members has also resulted in more helping, encouraging, tutoring, and assisting among students (Johnson, 1984).

Various heterogeneous groupings have resulted in an increased social acceptance of others as well. A strong determinant of friendship in general is a perception that there are important characteristics shared by two individuals. Students of different races often do not share these important similarities. In a sense, cooperative learning methods create a perceived similarity amongst students of varying racial background. Students in such settings are more likely to have friends outside their own race groups than they are in traditional classrooms. This has been indicated in various studies (Slavin, 1977, 1979; Allport, 1954) using sociometric measurement items as "Who are your best friends in the class?" The Zigler study (1981), along with many others, found positive achievement effects, as well as positively cross-ethnic friendships. It is apparent that cooperative learning does have an increased affect on relationships between students of different races while increasing their achievement.

Improved social relations has also been indicated amongst another heterogeneous grouping as well. In the traditional classroom all students are in competition toward grades and rewards (Johnson & Johnson, 1974; Slavin, 1977). The

academically handicapped special child is on the losing end of competition more frequently than the winning side. They are seen as less deserving of rewards by those who are successful. This negative feeling toward low-performing students does not promote growth of friendships.

In addition to performance, academically handicapped students often have poor social and communication skills (Bryan, 1976) which may discourage normal-progress students from pursuing relationships.

In a cooperative learning situation, academic status is not a determinant of status. The group membership within the team is more important and all members participate as a part of the group. With an increase in mainstreaming more academically handicapped students are being placed in the regular classroom. In a traditional setting their learning problems may cause them to remain separate from other students. Cooperative interactive helping found in the nontraditional classroom fosters positive interaction and overcomes poor social skills and leads to friendships between academically handicapped and non-handicapped students. This was evidenced in a study conducted by Johnson and Johnson (1981) in which increased interaction was characterized by task involvement, helping, and encouragement. More constructive cross-handicap interaction was also evidence in studies by Johnson, Johnson,

Warring, and Maruyama (1986) resulting in more interpersonal attraction. Corden, Pearl, and Bryan (1985) concluded upon their studies that cooperative learning shows promise for improving academic achievement and interpersonal relations in the mainstream classroom.

Because cooperative learning has such well-documented positive effects on varying social outcomes, it appears to be an answer to the question of how and when to develop social skills in the classroom. However, the recent educational climate is increasingly holding educational programs accountable for student achievement. Looking at the studies as a whole, indicates that cooperative learning has a positive effect on student achievement. Approximately 63% of the studies conducted in regular classrooms resulted in significantly positive achievement. The dependence of students on each others' learning appears to create peer norms supporting learning. This motivates students to achieve and to help one another achieve.

The students' need for belonging is fulfilled in a cooperative learning environment because of the caring each student developed for their teammates' success. They feel important because of an increased opportunity to contribute, have others listen, and increased opportunities for success. Cooperative learning has been shown to enhance both social

relationships, including cross-racial and cross-handicapped, as well as achievement enhancement without sacrificing one for the other. Teachers have the opportunity to devote time to the development of socialization while not jeopardizing growth in academic achievement.

Current educational practice in the traditional classroom is based on interpersonal competition and individualistic learning. This contradicts what has been indicated through research as effective education to develop social skills as well as achievement. Students are given opportunities to practice the skills of negotiating and communicating in a cooperative setting. These are important life skills to develop in order to experience success in today's society.

Further study will need to be conducted to determine the nature and quality of interaction amongst members of a team. Children's cooperative behavior skills were shown to transfer to interaction with peers who weren't members of the same learning teams, and to their behavior in social situations not structured by the teacher (Parker, 1984; Johnson, 1982).

However, more research will also be needed to determine the degree to which relationships developed during cooperative activities generalize to post-instructional free time situations.

Cooperative learning does become more of a "culture" or attitude that pervades the classroom rather than a specific technique. It is a method that must be consistent and long-term to develop the desired social skills intended. Developing the culture in the classroom requires specific skills to be used by students and teachers and supported by administration.

The need to give today's students an opportunity to be aware of and practice essential social skills necessary for tomorrow's world can be seen in a statement by Mary Robenson, associate professor from Elementary Education Department of Mansfield State College, "Perhaps more important (than achievement gains) in the long run is that we will have taught an attitude of cooperation--pulling together, helping others, sharing problems and unashamedly asking for help, all necessary values for today's world citizen" (Parker, 1984, p. 11).

Implementation of cooperative learning in the classroom does not happen naturally. An adequate amount of time must be allowed to develop the appropriate climate. A long term commitment on the part of the teacher is necessary. A significant change in the role of the teacher must take place. The teacher becomes less the sole source of knowledge as she develops skills in students to rely on their team to help solve problems. Olds (1982) suggests that learning is "not

a matter of adapting one's thinking to the thinking of someone in control, but more a matter of contributing to a shared understanding of something and finding ways to share that understanding" (Parker, 1985, p. 49).

In addition to long-range staff development, teachers need support while implementing the new skills. This support must be provided by fellow teachers as well as administrators. Administrators need to be knowledgeable about the benefits of cooperative learning and take an active role in implementing the concepts of this method of learning.

Piaget states that social interaction is necessary for cognitive development. Through the benefits that have been evidenced in research it appears obvious that careful consideration should be given to implementation of cooperative learning. With the increasing emphasis on the latter and the obvious need for the former, education needs to explore strategies to meet both.

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