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## Assuring the success of cooperative learning as a major instructional strategy in an elementary school

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## Assuring the success of cooperative learning as a major instructional strategy in an elementary school

### Abstract

Cooperative learning as an instructional strategy has been shown by numerous authors to produce marked gains in learning achievement, as well as other significant benefits . It is the intent of this paper to provide suggestions which will assure the successful implementation of cooperative learning as a major instructional strategy. The author has gathered suggestions and ideas from experts in cooperative learning published in current literature. The ideas have been developed through many years of trial and experimentation.

**ASSURING THE SUCCESS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING  
AS A MAJOR INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY  
IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

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**A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Educational Administration  
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**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education**

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**By Joel Rainbow  
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This Research Paper by: Joel Rainbow

Entitled: **ASSURING THE SUCCESS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING  
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ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the  
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Cooperative learning as an instructional strategy has been shown by numerous authors to produce marked gains in learning achievement, as well as other significant benefits. It is the intent of this paper to provide suggestions which will assure the successful implementation of cooperative learning as a major instructional strategy. The author has gathered suggestions and ideas from experts in cooperative learning published in current literature. The ideas have been developed through many years of trial and experimentation.

There are "principles for principals" as well as many specific suggestions for making it work. In the first section, **Training in a General Sense**, the reader will find the factors which make successful training programs. Next, in **Training a Staff in Cooperative Learning**, these factors are applied to the process of training a staff in the use of cooperative learning techniques. The last section, **Benefits of Cooperative Learning**, contains a brief summary of the benefits of cooperative learning. Guidelines and practical suggestions gleaned from current literature will be found throughout the paper.

The use of he/him/his indicates a generic reference to male or female. No discrimination is intended to either sex.

#### Training in a General Sense

In a paper which synthesizes current research on staff development, Sparks (1983) described the process of training and the types of training activities which are effective in producing improvement of instruction. She reminded us that Lieberman and Miller, (1981) emphasized that success of improvements in teaching is largely dependent upon the support of the building administrator. Unless the principal is participating with the teachers and supporting their development, the improvement process is doomed to failure.

She also reported that training takes time. Berman and McLaughlin (1978) found that the most effective staff development occurs when the training programs are spaced over a period of time, when teachers take the ideas and adapt and modify them to fit their individual setting. If the adaptation could occur over time, they would be more likely to produce long lasting change. Teachers need to be given ideas to enhance their skills, and the opportunity to modify them to meet their own instructional and personal

style. This change does not come quickly, or with great ease, as will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

Sparks quoted (Oja 1980) that staff development should strive to help teachers develop maturity on both the personal level (i.e. Maslow's hierarchy) and cognitive level (i.e. reasoning and conceptual level). She reminded the reader that staff development needs to specifically address the personal and cognitive developmental needs of the particular individuals in the group.

Sparks also quoted Doyle and Ponder (1977) in suggesting three criteria which influence teachers' implementation of recommended practices. The instrumentality refers to how clearly and specifically the recommendations are stated. The congruence describes how well the new practice fits with the teacher's philosophy of teaching. The third consideration is cost, with consideration given to the effort required versus the expected payoff of the new technique. (Sparks, 1983)

Further, Sparks concluded that the more highly implemented practices tended to be perceived as specific, philosophically acceptable, and/or worth the

effort. As a result, building administrators need to be aware that in order to get teachers to use the techniques being presented the teachers need to be convinced that the practice is worthwhile (in terms of student or teacher outcomes) and that the change can be made without too much work or disruption. (Sparks, 1983)

#### Training a Staff in Cooperative Learning

Mastering cooperative learning may be perceived as an overwhelming task, and many staff members may have developed a great deal of resistance to implement the practices in their teaching. As Lieberman and Miller pointed out in the previous section of this paper, it is the effort of the building administrator which determines the success of staff development. Consequently, the actions and reactions of the principal will, in large part, determine the successful implementation of cooperative learning as a major instructional strategy.

As a result of directed inservice practices, a support system needs to be put into place. Brandt (1990) pointed out that the principal has the task of managing the support system. He cannot be in the teacher's room daily to provide support for the teacher



who is utilizing cooperative learning. He can work to develop a collegial support system within the building, and/or combine with other buildings and provide support between teachers. The support systems can be the most important factor assuring the successful implementation of cooperative learning.

A group of Oklahoma teachers reported about their first year with cooperative learning. They stated that "at first, every day at least one of us was ready to give up (Edwards and Stout, 1990)." They went on to explain that without the support of fellow teachers and their administrator, they would not have been able to stick with the changes and relearning that was necessary to make cooperative learning work for them.

Support may involve providing a number of structures to give the teachers more information, feedback, or planning together. Ellis (1990) lists several options for providing needed support, including:

- Half-day release time training sessions  
throughout the year
- Occasional after-school sharing and  
problem-solving sessions

- Visits to observe cooperative learning in action in other classrooms
- A consultant's or colleague's observation of a teacher's use of cooperative learning, with feedback
- Planning or team-teaching a cooperative lesson with another teacher
- Access to a notebook of cooperative learning lessons developed by peers
- Paid time (during vacations) to develop cooperative learning lessons collaboratively with a colleague

Ellis concluded, that the more support teachers have, the more they use the new techniques.

A variety of opinions are expressed in the literature regarding how long it takes to get a staff started in using the strategies. However, as Ellis (1990) points out, change can take twice as long as you think it will--or more. Slavin (1989) stated that a one- or two-day inservice to the entire staff can get teachers using many of the strategies in their rooms immediately. However, Ellis (1990) found through six years of experience that four full days of released time with sessions occurring three or four weeks apart

was most effective. This schedule, she claimed, allows teachers sufficient time for practice and keeps the enthusiasm high.

It is possible to incorporate some of the elements of cooperative learning very quickly. However, the widespread use of cooperative learning as an instructional strategy takes a great deal of time. One reason is that it actually encompasses a large number and variety of instructional structures. Kagan (1990) reported that there are several dozen distinct structures. Since there are so many, he suggests that administrators introduce one structure per month. Examples could be presented for how that structure can be used. The staff would then have many opportunities to put that skill to use during the month. This may allow for mastery of a variety of structures to take place, but over a longer period. Collegial coaching and support could be promoted using this approach.

Others agree that considerable time is needed to fully implement cooperative learning. Sharon et al. (1984) found that one year is not long enough. Edwards and Stout (1990) reported that the Johnsons indicated that it takes two to three years to implement the program to full potential (60% of day). The principal

needs to prepare his staff for long term development if cooperative learning is to become a major focus of their school.

The teachers will grow professionally as the school becomes acclimated to this instructional strategy, others will begin to take notice. Ellis (1990) found that success can lead to fame, which can lead to lots of visitors. The gains in teacher self-confidence and commitment to the new strategy will make the extra time spent with visitors well spent. She goes on to say that "stars" will emerge when you least expect them. Some staff members may become particularly adept at some of the strategies or sharing experiences which may also be a great benefit to the staff and the students.

The principal expects his teachers to maintain clear and reasonable expectations of their students. This same clarity needs to be offered to the staff when describing how to use cooperative learning in their classrooms. Be aware the suggestions made need to fit with or be adaptable to each teacher's individual style of operating in their classroom. It also needs to be made clear that the successful implementation of cooperative learning will give major benefits to the

teacher and to the students. They need to know that it will clearly be worth the cost in time and effort.

Some practical suggestions have been gleaned from experts:

--Arrange groups efficiently--in groups or easy to form groups

--Determine group size--start small, pairing at first

--Decide how long groups should stay together

--Form new groups--do some getting acquainted activities

--Decide group responsibilities

--Encourage responsibility--jobs which are shared by the team

--Decide when to use cooperative learning

(Edwards and Stout, 1990)

Cooperative learning needs to be thought of as more than working in groups. Grouping students together to work on a project is not considered cooperative learning. Slavin (1989) pointed out that the individual learning of each group member must be the factor used to determine success. The students in the group need to be working together to improve the learning of their teammates. They must be working to earn certificates or some other recognition which is based on the individual learning of each group member.

As a result of students working together, they have an increased need to interact with each other. Edwards and Stout (1990) learned, through their own mistakes, that the direct teaching of social skills cannot be ignored. In fact, when students are working in groups, the classroom will get quite noisy if the students are not properly coached. Remember the social skill "Using quiet voices."

Cooperative learning allows a teacher to change much more than just the practice portion of the lesson. Limiting it to this would greatly reduce its potential for producing valuable change in the classroom. Sapon-Shevin and Schniedewind (1990) suggested that some fundamental changes could take place if the spirit of cooperative learning were applied to all areas of the school experience. For example, should we continue competitive grading practices? What about competitive athletics? Should all interested students get to serve on sports teams? What is the purpose of grading?

#### Benefits of Cooperative Learning

It was not the purpose of this paper to extol the benefits of cooperative learning. The building principal, however, needs to be aware as he is coordinating the training of a staff in cooperative learning that the benefits must be made clear to each

teacher. As Sparks mentioned, each staff member needs to be convinced that the gains from implementing cooperative learning need to outweigh the amount of effort it will take to bring it about. Slavin (1990) summarizes some of the benefits:

- Student learning is accelerated considerably when group goals and individual accountability are incorporated
- A wide array of affective gains are made--intergroup relations, acceptance of mainstreamed students, and self-esteem
- Liking and respect for students of other racial and ethnic groups results from working together
- Acceptance of mainstreamed academically handicapped students increases
- Friendship among peers increases

Two statements from current literature help to summarize the message of this paper. First, Slavin (1989) said that "just as hard work in sports is valued because a team member's success brings credit to the team and the school, so academic work is valued by peers in cooperative learning classes because it helps the team to succeed."

Also, simply calling something "cooperative learning" doesn't make it the best practice. Teachers

and students need to be empowered to value cooperation as both a process and content, in order to allow students a true experience in cooperation, where people work together to achieve mutual goals (Sapon-Shevin and Schniedewind, 1990).



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