

Cooperating for Success

Cooperative Learning Benefits Teachers and Students

BY ANITA OLIVER

While teaching four grades at a small multigrade school, I analyzed how much lesson planning I had to do every day. I also counted the hours that it took to do anything remotely creative.

I figured that I had about 60 preps daily if I did lesson planning for every class. Of course, some subjects like handwriting and spelling took less time than social studies or language arts, but there was still a lot of work to do. I spent an enormous amount of time grading papers, managing classroom activities, and preparing materials.

It seemed to me that there had to be more to life than spending hours and hours outside the classroom getting ready to teach and then grading what I had taught. If I gave my 20 students a one-page assignment in each of their eight subjects, then I had 160 pages a day to grade. If I assigned two pages, then it would be . . . well, as you can see, this quickly becomes ridiculous. And I had to record each of those assignments in my gradebook. If it took me just 30 seconds to grade and record a page, this still consumed about an hour and a half. And most papers take far more than 30 seconds to grade and record.

Teaching in small schools takes a lot of work! Not to mention extracurricular activities, Sabbath school, Pathfinders, prayer meetings, school board meetings, and the myriad other things small churches expect teachers to do.

There are numerous solutions. Some

work better than others:

- Having students grade part of their work,
- Hiring an aide (a pipe dream in many small schools),
- Asking parents to volunteer (most of them are working, too),
- Not grading some of the work (in some places that may

work, in others I can already hear the parents!), or

- Cooperative learning.

Is cooperative learning the answer to all small-school problems? Of course not. It takes time to implement, and not everyone feels comfortable with giving students more control over their learning. But it is an alternative that works for an ever-increasing number of teachers. It can shorten grading time and provide a vehicle for more creative teaching.

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Designing a Successful Program

Before you can design a successful cooperative learning program, you first need to analyze your school's current classroom structure.¹ Attending cooperative learning workshops is a good way to get started. However, you will not be able to rely solely on the work of others when designing a new program. Materials developed for single-grade classrooms will have to be adapted for the multigrade room. Nevertheless, if you are looking for some help or alternatives to your current classroom program, you should give it a try.

In recent years cooperative learning has become one of the most frequently discussed methods among teachers at all levels. Some teachers hesitate to use it because they fear loss of control over their students. Others think that student achievement will decline. Teachers who use cooperative learning skillfully can attest that neither of these fears is realized.

Let me tell you how cooperative learning worked for me. I arranged students in basic seating groups of two, three, or four. Larger groups functioned during such classes as reading and social studies. In these cases, students might choose a group to join or I might assign them to a specific group. Groups often included students from several grades.

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Students usually worked at their desks or at tables but could use bean bag chairs when they read together, played a game, or completed an activity. Some classes were designed so that everyone studied the same topic at the same time. At other times, groups worked on separate tasks that contributed to the overall project.

I found that if I took the time to plan an activity well and made it interesting, all of the students worked. One student did not do all the work while others

wandered off, slept, or made trouble. The crucial aspect of cooperative learning is *planning*. Students really do work together well when they have been taught to do so.

Some people feel that cooperative learning is too noisy. Because children are talking together there will be more sound. The teacher must "monitor" what is being said, and make a distinction between sound and noise and/or cooperative interaction.² Occasional reminders will help keep noise within manageable levels.

Research

Studies of cooperative learning have shown the effectiveness of this teaching method. One research review indicated that cooperative learning raises student achievement when the teacher requires both group and individual goals to be met.³

Robert E. Slavin, after extensive study, wrote that cooperative learning is one of the most widely researched educational methods.⁴ But what does that mean to a classroom teacher? To a traditional teacher, cooperative learning sounds like fast kids doing all the work, slow students goofing off, a noisy classroom, and the teacher perpetually feeling frustrated. They wonder if students can work together and get anything done in some

sort of order. Can they work together and still be individually accountable?

The research findings suggest some answers to these questions. Roger and David Johnson found that students generally learn more in cooperative activities than if they work alone. Slow students made the greatest gains in learning when involved in cooperative activities. Students remember what they learn in a cooperative group better than when working alone.⁵

Cooperative learning has positive effects on other aspects of student life. When contrasted with competitive and solitary learning, cooperative learning increases motivation, promotes respect for teachers and peers, and raises self-esteem, according to Johnson & Johnson.⁶

Both Slavin and Johnson & Johnson say that children need to learn to function with competitive and individualistically designed activities. However, because of the implications for student achievement, they believe that cooperative learning should be given much more serious consideration by teachers.⁷

Methods

Johnson & Johnson stress teaching cooperative skills before implementing cooperative learning. Since students do not automatically know how to work together, they need to be taught the skills neces-

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sary for cooperative learning.

Students must first become motivated to learn cooperative skills. Then they must learn what skills are involved in working cooperatively. Lastly, students must practice cooperative learning skills until they are proficient at them.⁸

In most jobs people need to be able to negotiate, motivate others, and develop positive relationships. These skills all depend on a person's ability to cooperate with others.⁹ As they prepare students for work and for life, educators should help them to develop these very necessary skills.

Slavin states that cooperative learning must include both individual accountability and group goals. He has developed Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) and Team

Assisted Individualization (TAI), as well as other techniques that incorporate these requirements.

TAI combines the strength of cooperative learning with individualization to help overcome the problems of working alone. It is primarily used for mathematics classes.¹⁰ TAI has been used from grade three through community college. In TAI, students are assigned to teams of four or five from several ability levels. Each team includes both boys and girls. Students are initially given a placement test and then situated at the appropriate level in an individualized program. Teams change about every eight weeks. One strength of TAI is that all students are part of a group, yet each can receive individualized help.¹¹

Teachers have time for small-group instruction when they use TAI. The students are responsible for checking and helping one another in their work groups. Students can confer with others in their group if they need help. TAI includes materials and instructions for individual work. It tells how and when to teach whole-class units and how to give team scores.¹²

In the second program, CIRC, students work in teams. CIRC is designed for use in reading and language-arts classes. The three components of CIRC are basal reading, direct instruction, and language arts. Students work together in all of these activities.¹³

Spencer Kagan has developed structures for helping teachers use cooperative learning activities. These structures are not tied to content areas, but are designed so teachers can use them in any subject.¹⁴ This approach allows teachers to incorporate cooperative learning into a variety of learning situations on every level of education.¹⁵

Kagan's structures are designed so that teachers can develop their own cooperative learning activities. They learn to do so by becoming acquainted with basic frameworks. Teachers can then develop an unlimited number of workable cooperative learning techniques without depending on others for planning. But in getting started they often prefer to use successful strategies developed by others. Later, they can develop their own strategies.

Teachers' Experiences

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Teachers' Experiences

Don't expect to instantly switch over to a

totally cooperative classroom. Cooperative learning requires careful planning and is entirely too much work to do all at once. First, learn how and then start small. Otherwise, you may end up with chaos. Go only as fast as you and your students can comfortably handle change.

Here are some ideas for making cooperative learning work from teachers who have tried it. First, make a commitment to stay with cooperative learning for long enough that you and your students become proficient at it. Second, unless you have used cooperative learning before and have lots of materials, go slowly. Necessary social skills aren't acquired overnight. Students need *time* to learn how to cooperate. Begin with one lesson in one subject; then gradually expand your cooperative learning time.¹⁶

Third, if there is an understanding teacher to whom you can turn for support, spend time conferencing together. This will help ease you into the new way of teaching.¹⁷ Even if you are in a one-teacher school, there may be a teacher close by whom you can call occasionally.

Conclusion

So how did I cut the hours I spent in preparation and grading? I studied about cooperative learning and then developed

my own cooperative learning activities, units, and group. Some of the small-schools programs developed for Adventist teachers are well suited to cooperative learning, and I used many of them.

The students took more responsibility for their own learning by planning together and helping to evaluate their work. Because of higher student interest in the subject matter and activities, I found that I had fewer discipline problems and more time to spend helping students on their projects. Having students work together helped raise not only interest levels, but also test scores.

When your students' standardized test scores go up, when they work together cooperatively and love doing their school work, they feel better about learning and about themselves. This makes the time spent integrating cooperative learning and preparing cooperative activities worthwhile. ☞

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3. Robert E. Slavin, *Cooperative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990), p. 33.
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5. Roger T. Johnson and David W. Johnson, "Student-Student Interaction: Ignored but Powerful," *Journal of Teacher Education*, 36:4 (July-August 1985), p. 23.
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8. David W. Johnson and Robert R. Johnson, "Social Skills for Successful Group Work," *Educational Leadership* (December 1989/January 1990), p. 30.
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10. Slavin, 89/90, p. 22.
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12. _____, "Here to Stay—Or Gone Tomorrow?" *Educational Leadership* (December 1989/January 1990), p. 3.
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RESEARCH FINDINGS ON COOPERATIVE EDUCATION

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- The Cooperation Company, P. O. Box 422, Deer Park, CA 94576. (707) 963-5689. This company, run by an Adventist principal, carries a wide variety of cooperative how-to books and many games.