Cooperative Learning and Middle Schools: What Would It Take to Really Do It Right?

A Perfect Fit?

A recent publication of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), The Middle School—and Beyond (George, Stevenson, Thomason, & Beane, 1992) also makes a strong case for using cooperative learning as an integral part of the middle school program. The authors write:

Cooperative grouping techniques foster an atmosphere of interdependence in which members grow to value helping and teamwork in order to achieve group goals. Students further recognize, and learn to appreciate, differences among themselves when they are cooperatively grouped. Such realizations foster understanding and subsequent respect for individual differences in aptitudes, talents, and approaches to tasks—an understanding that is certainly useful in the workplace. (p. 73)

Evans, Gatewood, and Green (1993) examine the match between middle school education and cooperative learning and cite five reasons why cooperative learning has become popular in middle school:

1. “The match between cooperative learning goals and techniques and young adolescent social, emotional and intellectual characteristics is almost uncanny” (p. 4). Cooperative learning meets many of the major needs of students of this age, i.e., the chance to socialize and be part of the group, share feelings and receive emotional support, and learn to see things from other perspectives.

2. The goal of creating middle schools that are democratic, inclusive institutions, and do not track or separate students on the basis of class, race, or gender, is highly compatible with cooperative learning’s...
focus on mixed-ability, heterogeneous groups, which require the efforts of all students to be successful.

3. Cooperative learning is a “perfect solution” to the ways in which middle school students tease, taunt, exclude, and compete with one another. “By their very nature and structure, members of cooperative groups are forced to work with, and not against, each other. . . . Individual cooperative groups are only as strong as their weakest members. All members of the group must cooperate and assist each other if they are to have a chance for team recognition. . . . Though cooperative teams do compete with each other, members within the teams must do just the opposite” (p. 5).

4. The research literature on cooperative learning shows increased achievement, more positive heterogeneous relationships, better attitudes toward school and teachers, and higher self-esteem—all compatible with broader goals for American middle schools.

5. The “seeming simplicity of the theory and the ease of its implementation” (p. 5) has made cooperative learning particularly appealing to middle school teachers.

The match sounds perfect: a peer-centered pedagogy that both promotes academic achievement and builds positive social relationships. But there is more here than meets the eye. In researching this article, I drew on my extensive experience in cooperative learning and my work with middle school teams on curriculum building and cooperation. But acknowledging that this experience clearly falls short of the personal experiences of my just-turned 14-year-old friend who has completed 2 years at a middle school that espouses the use of cooperative learning, I asked her what I should write about cooperative learning in middle schools. This was her disheartening reply:

Tell them it’s too late to start. Tell them that if they haven’t done cooperative learning before, it just doesn’t change anything. They put us in these “politically correct” groups—you know, Blacks and Whites, girls and boys—and all the same tensions are there. One kid will make a racist remark and that will split up the group. Or one kid starts “dissing” the other and everyone gets mad at everyone else. And then one kid does all the work and nobody else cares, or one kid gets the answer and won’t show it to anyone else. And some kids just won’t work with others and it just doesn’t work.

While this personal statement represents perhaps no more than one student’s negative experiences with poorly articulated cooperative learning, it does illuminate some valid concerns that must be addressed if cooperative learning is to be successful. When students have little or no experience with cooperative learning, simply placing them in cooperative groups and instructing them to “cooperate” is not likely to be sufficient. Issues of race, class, and gender will not automatically be resolved by the use of cooperative learning groups. Social skills may need to be taught explicitly. And the curriculum and the task need to be structured so that students must work together in order to be successful.

The problems identified by the middle-school graduate quoted above illuminate the ways in which cooperative learning is embedded within broader academic and social contexts. Cooperative learning is not a panacea and, implemented in isolation of other reforms and changes, it will not bring about the results we might hope for.

As a proponent, practitioner, and researcher in the field for the last 20 years, I remain excited about the ways in which cooperative learning can provide a framework for developing learning communities, improving the interaction between students, deepening the curriculum, and empowering students and teachers within a common setting. At an even deeper level, I think cooperation can become the underlying philosophy and framework for schools and education, guiding our curriculum, our pedagogy, and our modes of evaluation. But there is no quick fix.

Limitations of Popularity

As an early advocate, I should be happy about the apparently quick spread and wide implementation of cooperative learning. But, sadly, much of what I have seen presented under the rubric of cooperative learning is partial, flawed, disembodied, and sometimes neither cooperative nor learning. Nancy Schniedewind and I have raised elsewhere the ways in which cooperative learning must be embraced as a teaching philosophy and a set of principles rather than as a teaching gimmick if it is to reach its full potential (Sapon-Shevin & Schniedewind, 1989/1990, 1992).

Often the content of cooperative learning represents the same-old curriculum implemented in groups, with little or no attention to divergent perspectives or meaningful learning. Boasts by cooperative learning advocates that cooperative learning can
be used to teach “anything” have resulted in just that: teaching anything, as opposed to something important.

There are often clear incompatibilities between the content and the process. Students are left with a singular perspective about the inevitability of conflict and the relative lack of importance of cooperation when cooperative learning lessons on World War II focus on famous battles and generals with no attention to alternative, cooperative possibilities for resolving conflict or the roles played by peacemakers. Teaching about American history from one war to the next; failing to study the contributions of women and people of color; not studying about cooperative efforts in society (labor unions, the Red Cross, and so on)—all of these limit, rather than broaden, students’ perspectives.

Implementing cooperative learning as a thing apart from the rest of the school day is also limiting. Schools that, in the name of balance, still support competitive school-wide activities—e.g., permit or even encourage exclusion in clubs and extracurricular activities, track and grade students competitively—give mixed messages about the saliency of cooperative learning. Trying to have heterogeneous groups of students work together in schools that make no other attempts to address issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and tracking is not adequate to alter students’ perceptions of one another or improve their interactions.

Mandating student and teacher behavior regarding cooperative learning disempowers both students and teachers. Models of cooperative learning that rigidly specify the curriculum, teacher and student roles, and testing procedures do not allow cooperative learning to meet its promise of improved pedagogy and helping students take control over their own learning. There are now numerous books of worksheets to be done in groups, and these are identified as cooperative learning! Similarly, schools that mandate one specific approach, leaving teachers with no choices about how, when, or with whom they learn about cooperative learning, limit the extent to which teachers creatively take ownership of their own learning and teaching.

Many cooperative learning programs still involve competition, creating mixed messages for students and possibly negating the positive social effects of cooperative learning. The Carnegie Coun-

cil’s report, Turning Points, described earlier, lists as an example of a cooperative learning approach one in which teams of students are homogeneously grouped by ability and then earn individual and group points. One of the leading advocates of cooperative learning, Bob Slavin, believes that competition and external rewards are a critical part of cooperative learning (Slavin, 1990, 1991).

Evans, Gatewood, and Green (1993) explore the ways in which cooperative learning is similar to other educational innovations that have been reduced to passing “fads” and warn that this may be its fate. They cite the emphasis on cooperative learning gurus, the “explosive suddenness” of the innovation, the promise of a “quick fix” for complex problems, lack of adequate preparation for implementation, and an overreliance on cookbook, facile implementation (p. 6).

I would agree with Evans et al. that cooperative learning should be part of a larger, long-term strategic plan, that teachers and students must be better prepared for cooperative learning, and that additional empirical data is needed. I do not, however, agree that the solution to poor implementation is, as they suggest, implementing cooperative learning “selectively” as only “one of many instructional tools at a teacher’s disposal” (p. 7). Rather, I believe that the response to poor or partial implementation should be better models of cooperative learning and a deeper understanding of the underlying principles and changes demanded by such an approach. Each of the factors articulated by Evans et al. as reasons for cooperative learning’s rapid acceptance within middle schools can be unpacked to allow us to see some of the inherent contradictions and limitations that keep cooperative learning from being fully operationalized and coherent with middle school programs.

Cooperative learning is supposed to make students feel they are part of the group. But how do we make sure that all students within cooperative learning groups do experience this inclusion and acceptance? How do we insure that CL activities actually provide emotional support rather than simply placing students in groups and hoping nice things happen?

If cooperative learning is embraced because it is compatible with a more democratic notion of schooling, what do we do about middle schools that are still highly tracked? What about parents, teachers, and students who object to mixed-ability grouping as
“unfair”? What about objections to including “gifted and talented” students in cooperative learning because they will be “used” as tutors or teachers or to including students with disabilities because they will require additional resources or modifications?

If cooperative learning is supposed to help students improve their interpersonal skills, how does one go about insuring that students will develop appropriate social skills as part of cooperative learning? When mixed-ability groups are characterized (as by Evans et al., 1993, p. 5) as having “weak” members on whom the group goal rests, how do teachers keep that child from becoming scapegoated or marginalized? What issues are raised by even describing students as “weak members”?

A growing body of research evidence supports the utility of cooperative learning. But how is research on cooperative learning (or any educational practice) conceptualized, conducted, and interpreted, and what are the implications of the kinds of research questions asked? If researchers in cooperative learning cite the improved performance of cooperative groups when extrinsic motivation or rewards are used (Slavin, 1991), for example, how do we evaluate other behavioral and affective results of such an approach? What happens when standardized tests are used as the exclusive or major criteria for evaluating whether or not cooperative learning is “working” and should be continued, often at the expense of asking and documenting other kinds of educational and social changes in the classroom?

Lastly, if cooperative learning has met with acceptance because of its apparent simplicity, perhaps we should ask if simplicity is compatible with systematic, thoughtful, comprehensive implementation? Maybe the “readily-available training programs which are extremely popular among teachers” (Evans et al., 1993, p. 6) keep teachers from assuming full ownership and responsibility for implementing cooperative learning. Maybe “training” is incompatible with education (Sapon-Shevin, 1991c).

But delighting in cooperative learning’s widespread acceptance and rampant spread while bemoaning its limitations fails to draw the connections between the eagerness with which cooperative learning has been embraced and the shallowness of its implementation. Not only has the widespread adoption of the technique made its implementation shallow but, more significantly, a focus on technique and easy implementation is precisely what has made cooperative learning attractive. If cooperative learning has the potential to radically alter the ways in which we think about students, teachers, schools, and society, then its instant popularity and easy acceptance should make us pause.

We need to ask, what does the rapid embrace of cooperative learning tell us about the ways in which it has been diluted, diverted and distorted? We need to understand what resistance to far-reaching cooperative learning implementation tells us about our educational system and our society.

**Toward Full Implementation**

In an article entitled “Resistance to Cooperative Learning: Making Sense of Its Deletion and Distortion,” Kohn (1992) explores four reasons why cooperative learning can be threatening to teachers:

1. **CL reduces control and predictability**
2. **CL demands attention to social goals**
3. **CL challenges our commitment to individualism**
4. **CL challenges our commitment to the value of competition**

Kohn (1992) notes:

> Just as some educators have decided to stay away from CL—or to back off very quickly once having tried it—others continue to use it but in a form intended to reduce its dissonance with their previous beliefs. (p. 46)

Each of Kohn’s identified points of resistance to cooperative learning can be examined in terms of (a) how this resistance may become operationalized as diluted or minimal cooperative learning within middle schools and (b) what changes full articulation and implementation would require.

**The need to give up power and control**

Ideally, cooperative learning involves empowering learners and teachers, teaching them to structure their own learning and their own goals. But within many middle schools, the structure of the school, the classroom, and the curriculum make this problematic. Elementary education teachers generally have (and perceive themselves as having) more flexibility than middle school teachers who may already be departmentalized and expected to follow a set curriculum.

Although following a predetermined, even a rigid curriculum, does not preclude the implementation of
cooperative learning, what I call “fully cooperative learning” requires that teachers feel valued, trusted, and empowered to design and shape their classrooms and their curricula as they see fit. Thus, an overly-rigid, fixed curriculum may discourage teachers from taking full ownership of students’ programs and their own teaching.

Additionally, a school-wide focus on control (e.g., dress codes, discipline policies) can disempower both teachers and students. Fully cooperative learning involves allowing—encouraging—students to take responsibility for their own learning and that of their classmates. The kind of sudden norm switching required of students—for most of the day we will tell you where to go and what to do and what to wear and when to use the lavatory but for this 45-minute period we want you to be fully responsible and mature in your approach to learning and one another—may be difficult.

Models of cooperative learning in which the teacher continues to make all or most of the decisions regarding what will be studied, by whom, and for how long are ultimately not empowering. Incorporating external rewards as part of a cooperative learning model reduces student ownership, autonomy, and control (Kohn, 1991).

In an article by Klemp, Hon, and Shorr (1993), for example, the authors describe a cooperative literacy program they have implemented in their middle school. The model involves teaching students ways of learning from texts and articulating learning strategies for literacy activities. While the cooperative learning activities themselves are meaningful and authentic, the management system is problematic. The approach involves creating what the authors refer to as a “layer of middle level management for the teacher” whereby students are awarded points for attendance, being on time, bringing materials to class, and engaging in learning activities.

The authors report: “A group with fewer students demonstrating the desired behaviors would receive fewer points. Students who go off task may also cause the pod to earn fewer points” (p. 23). While the authors describe a process for helping the groups to solve each other’s problem so that they do not “become hostile to the student who brings down the group” (p. 23), students’ potential for influencing each other’s attendance and tardiness may be limited. A focus on points and the use of this kind of interdependent reward creates a teacher-directed, teacher-monitored behavior management system rather than teaching students to assume control and ownership over their own learning and behavior. Embracing cooperative learning broadly would require attending to norms of student empowerment throughout the school day and throughout the curriculum.

Additionally, expecting teachers to empower students when they themselves do not feel supported or powerful is at best contradictory and at worst, impossible. In a study of cooperative learning implementation in middle schools, Murray (1992) reported that of the nine schools that participated in the program by receiving cooperative learning training as a team, only one team stayed intact throughout the year. The teachers cited the lack of administrative support as a major factor in determining the extent to which they continued learning about and practicing cooperative instructional strategies.

If teachers do not have time to meet, learn, share, and support one another, it is difficult for them to provide that support to students and to continue to practice a form of pedagogy that may be quite different from that which they are familiar or comfortable. Schools anxious to promote ongoing cooperative learning must build in active administrative support and opportunities for teacher renewal and learning.

The need to focus on social goals

There is tremendous variation within the field of cooperative learning in terms of how much explicit attention is devoted to valuing, teaching, and evaluating students’ social behaviors during cooperative learning. Although all cooperative learning approaches are based on peer interaction and rely, at least to some extent, on students working with one another, there is huge variation in the amount of time and explicit instruction devoted to teaching students to listen, negotiate, problem solve, resolve conflicts, and encourage one another.

Johnson and Johnson’s (1987) “learning together” model, for example, involves explicit teaching of social skills and continuing monitoring and evaluation of the ways in which students interact. Social interaction is seen as a valid goal of the cooperative learning process, maybe even the central goal, and not just as the vehicle toward academic achievement. In other models (Slavin’s [1990] “teams games tournaments,” for example), the focus is on academic achievement, and social roles are not explicitly taught.
Rethinking Middle Grades

Many elementary school teachers are comfortable teaching social skills and are able to structure their days with their students so that such instruction is well integrated with other, more academic pursuits. But in middle schools and high schools, the focus often becomes more exclusively academic, and 45-minute periods devoted to individual subject matter make taking time for social skill instruction more problematic.

One middle school math teacher who believes strongly in cooperative learning explained to me that she spent at least 15 minutes of every math period working on the social skills necessary for the cooperative learning in which her students were engaged. Some parents and teachers, however, questioned her, wondering how teaching conflict resolution or listening skills was “teaching math” and whether she was shortchanging her students by doing “less math” with them. Although her students did admirably in math and performed well on standardized tests, the pressures to “just do math” were considerable. Similarly, when one sixth grade teacher who believed strongly that time spent building a solid learning community is never wasted time, spent the first month of school working on cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution skills, other teachers challenged her priorities, wondering when she would get to “really teaching.”

The assumption that academic achievement is more important than social skill development, and the mistaken notion that academic achievement is independent of social skills and peer interaction, can make full implementation of cooperative learning at the middle school level challenging. Although a team of five teachers who share a group of students may agree that social skill instruction is important, the perception that one teacher (or more) will be the one “giving up instructional time” to do so may increase the probability that such a focus will be minimized.

Full articulation of cooperative learning would require setting social skill teaching and development as a priority, not simply as a means to higher achievement. That the acquisition of social skills is deemed important would be demonstrated by (a) preparation and education for teachers in social skill teaching, (b) the designation of curricular goals that explicitly focus on social skill acquisition, and (c) evaluation of students’ social skills through ongoing assessment.

A focus on community

Kohn argues that promoting cooperative learning in terms of the ways in which it will help individuals to learn better social skills and get a better job “does nothing to challenge the individualism at the core of American education or society” (p. 48). This conflict—between the good of the group and the good of the individual—becomes heated within cooperative learning around issues of grading, team composition, and the involvement of students identified as “gifted or talented” or as “disabled.”

Matthews (1992) reports the results of her interviews about cooperative learning with 15 gifted sixth and eighth graders from a wealthy suburban district. She describes their distaste for having to work with students less capable than themselves and their desire to work with students at their own intellectual level. Such remarks should not be used as a reason to suspend cooperative learning with gifted students, but as evidence of the ways in which the cooperative learning lessons in which they participate are limited, simplistic, unimaginative, and poorly structured. The students’ reports of their discomfort with other students and their reluctance to trust other, less-gifted students emblemizes our failure as teachers to communicate to students the important values of diversity, respect, and inclusion (Sapon-Shevin, Ayres, & Duncan, 1994; Sapon-Shevin & Schniedewind, 1993).

In reporting the concerns of parents, teachers, and students related to cooperative learning, Gartin and Digby (1993) respond that homogeneous grouping may be the solution to concerns about the inclusion of gifted and talented students or those with special needs within cooperative activities. Substituting homogeneous groups for heterogeneous groups as though this were a minor adaptation in cooperative learning rather than a basic distortion of the principles and values inherent in the approach is evidence of our collective failure to articulate and embrace an ethic of community and inclusion. Cooperative learning cannot achieve the goals for which it is admired—creating a democratic, inclusive society, modeling respect for differences, teaching social skills and teaching skills, and insuring success for all—if it is used merely as an organizational structure within tracked, segregated classrooms (Sapon-Shevin, 1991b; Sapon-Shevin, Ayres, & Duncan, 1994).

Putting students in heterogeneous groups is not sufficient to redress existing student prejudices and status differentials (Cohen, 1990). Creating classroom and school communities that respond positively to
differences and actively promote social equality requires an ongoing commitment to address issues related to all forms of diversity. Gartin and Digby (1993) report that teachers responded to student complaints about the composition of their cooperative learning teams by rotating membership frequently. This strategy fails to address student biases and prejudices and does not teach students how to negotiate differences and conflicts.

Anti-racism teaching programs, programs designed to address homophobia and sexual discrimination, the adoption of purposively heterogeneous grouping patterns, and the elimination of tracking are all necessary for cooperative learning to be fully consonant with other dimensions of schools' hidden and explicit curricula related to difference. Anne Wheelock's (1992) new book, Crossing the Tracks, contains numerous examples of middle schools that have implemented untracked, multi-level teaching programs and have explicitly addressed issues of grouping, segregation, and prejudice through their curricula and their school organization.

The willingness to abandon competition

"Selling" cooperative learning as an adjunct to competition or promoting methods that use competition between groups represents an unwillingness to look deeply at the purposes of schooling. If cooperative learning is used in ways that do not challenge the competitive hierarchies within schools—which students succeed and which fail, which receive enriched opportunities and which are shunted into direct instruction—then we are merely tinkering on the edges of the system.

The uproar created when the Plainfield Community Middle School in Plainfield, Indiana (Ryan, 1992) revised their extracurricular program to be inclusive (a 72-member cheerleading squad, 120 students on the track team, 234 students in the three choirs) is evidence of the deeply ingrained notions of schools as selecting and sorting mechanisms. Fully "buying into" cooperative learning would mean a serious and thoughtful examination of our educational system and the commitment to examining the role schools play in recreating existing race, class, and gender inequalities in our society.

A commitment to abandoning schools as sorting agents would require moving toward inclusive classrooms and inclusive schools—abandoning segregated special education programs and segregated gifted programs—and designing multi-level curricula that challenge all students at their own level within a common community.

Conclusion

A full commitment to the principles of cooperative learning would move schools beyond identifying their mission as changing the way in which instruction is delivered. Embracing cooperative learning as a school-wide philosophy would require the revamping of our curricula, our pedagogy, our grouping patterns, our grading and assessment procedures, and our staffing patterns. Our goal should not be to implement cooperative learning as simply as possible, leaving intact the underlying beliefs, structures, and practices of teachers, parents, administrators, and students. Rather, our goal should be schools in which cooperative learning can function as a catalyst—forcing us to uncover and dismantle the structures that separate and damage children and reinvent schools that embody social and educational equity and justice.

References


