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Cooperative Grouping in Literacy Instruction

**Katherine D. Wiesendanger
Lois Bader**

The majority of educational programs group children according to ability or achievement level, giving the teacher the locus of control. Generally schools stress competitive grading and individual competition, and attempt to motivate students by external methods. While students do need to work alone and learn to compete, this conventional structure is very one-sided. Many classrooms only incorporate teacher controlled, competitive environments. Unfortunately this approach leads to frustration and is particularly detrimental for low-achieving students because their chances for success diminish as others attain their goals (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec, 1988). In a completely teacher controlled environment, students are less likely to take initiative or be responsible for their own learning. They may feel that their own personal experiences are irrelevant and that only teacher-prescribed tasks are worthwhile.

An alternative is to incorporate cooperative grouping, which puts students in control of their own learning and better meets their diverse needs. Research has demonstrated that this is not a fad, but an effective method to improve education (Slavin, 1989; Johnson, Maruyama,

Johnson, Nelson, and Skon, 1981). However, many teachers and students find it difficult to develop a cooperative environment in the classroom because the transition process may prove overwhelming. In order for cooperative learning to be a viable option, the teacher must develop techniques for its implementation.

The purposes of this paper are to describe cooperative grouping, to explain how the transition may be made to cooperative grouping, and to show how the process can be adapted to reading and writing instruction.

A place to start: Informal pairing

The transition process from a traditional to a cooperative learning environment should be completed gradually. For several weeks, teachers might implement informal cooperative learning pairs. During this stage, children are paired with different partners throughout the day for short term intervals. Seating arrangements do not change permanently, but when the situation warrants, children may temporarily move their chairs to work with their assigned partner. Informal pairing is effective with any size class, for any subject, at any time, in a variety of ways. It can be used before the lesson to help focus students, during the lesson to break it up and check for understanding, or at the end of a lesson to summarize its principal elements. Teachers may have students who have grasped and successfully completed an assignment or reached a goal tutor those who require additional explanations. One purpose of this stage is to challenge gradually students' previously constructed understandings of school by having them begin to control their own learning. Another is to determine the effectiveness of pupil relationships by carefully observing which students best cooperate when given a task to complete.

Formal pairing

Once the goals of the initial stage have been accomplished, students are ready to move to formal pairing. During this stage, teachers assign pupil partners and pair their desks to form more permanent, working relationships. When the situation warrants, two students may easily work together without the physical movement required in the previous stage. When pairing students, the teacher should consider pupils' academic ability and personality. This stage is important because students, feeling less isolated in the classroom, are more apt to accept the advantages of cooperation and make a stronger commitment to it.

Heterogeneous grouping

After students complete the two previous stages and gradually change their philosophical approach to learning, they are prepared to work in heterogeneous groups. One strategy is to create base groups of six students (or approximately six, depending on classroom size), which are kept together four or five weeks before being reassigned. Group members should be heterogeneous in personality, sex, ethnicity, personal characteristics, academic performance level and ability. If possible, each base group should contain an equal number of low, average, and high achieving students. Desks can be left in group clusters all day. Students face each other for group work and simply rotate their desks to face the front during instruction. The six member team can either work together as one unit or be restructured into ready made partners or two heterogeneously grouped triads.

Selected structures adapted to literacy learning

There are literally dozens of specific structures designed for cooperative grouping (Kagan, 1989; Aronson, et. al., 1978; Slavin, 1990; Lyman, 1987; Sharon and Shackar,

1988), which may include anywhere from two to six students. We have selected the ones whose versatility allows for adaptation to literacy instruction, and given examples of how teachers may use the various structures to meet that end. Although our examples have all been successfully implemented in the classroom, they should not preclude teachers from discovering additional ways these organizational patterns can be effectively used.

Team word webbing. Working simultaneously on a piece of chart paper, students write words which are important in the topic being studied, and make drawings which illustrate main concepts and their supporting elements. Before implementing team word webbing, students should have had numerous opportunities to web as a teacher-directed activity. *Literacy application:* Triads work well in this structure, which can be used to help students understand multiple relationships and analyze concepts into components. It can be used with either narrative or expository material. For example, after reading a story, students might be asked to write the name of the most important element or character in the story in a center circle and then to create a surrounding web of words and drawings.

Roundtable. The teacher asks a question that has multiple correct responses. Each student in turn writes one answer as the paper and pencil are passed around the group, composed of six or three members. With simultaneous roundtables, more than one pencil and paper are needed. *Literacy application:* This can be used in reading instruction for activating prior knowledge, comprehension monitoring, and skills assessment. For example, prior to reading a selection, students might answer a general question about their knowledge of the subject, or they might record as many facts as possible learned after reading the

selection. Information obtained may be used as a basis for small group or whole class discussion. Students might then categorize the responses, place them in order from least to most important, or select several on which to expand.

Jigsaw. A different part of the material is assigned to each student on the team. Each student on the team works with members of other teams who are also assigned to become experts on that topic. Students return to their teams and teach all members of their group, who are then responsible for learning all aspects of the material. A typical timetable might include the assignment of the topics to the various team members, half hour sessions for working with the team members from the other groups, and a final fifteen minute period for members of the original team to confer. *Literacy application:* This procedure can be used for the acquisition and presentation or review of units or other large amounts of material. Assignments should be made to each group member according to the student's ability, and reading material should be provided at students' independent reading level.

Pairing

There are several ways in which teachers can use pairing situations to enhance reading instruction. Each six member team can be divided into three pairs. Because this grouping is more intimate, each student is given more opportunity to be active in learning. Students may select their own partner, or teachers may assign partners.

Partners - students work in pairs to master or create content. *Literacy application:* Partners can work together using variations of partner reading. If two students are evenly matched in reading ability, they may alternately read a page from a story on their independent reading level.

In cross age groupings, children from a higher grade are paired with students from a lower grade. This is particularly useful for low achieving students who can share their expertise with their younger partner. Older less skilled readers practice reading books appropriate for their ability level and subsequently share these books with younger students. For example, having low achieving fifth graders read to a kindergarten class often greatly improves their self-concept as well as reading skills. The stigma of reading easier material is lessened because they are now in a teaching role.

Pairs check. Students work in pairs within teams. Within pairs, students take turns – one solves a problem while the other coaches. Students then reverse roles. They can check with another pair in the team to make certain they have the correct answer. *Literacy application:* While popular in mathematics instruction, the pairs check technique can also be effectively implemented in reading for reinforcement of sight words. Each pair is given sight words or phrases that have been previously taught. One child says the words while the other coaches. They then alternate. If both children have difficulty, they may consult with members of another pair. A similar approach can be used to teach spelling.

Three step pair interview. Given a specific topic, students interview one another in pairs. Each member alternates asking and answering the questions. Then each student tells the whole team what was learned from the interview. It helps if a certain amount of time is designated for each phase and each student. For example, after twenty minutes of reading or whole class discussion, allow six to ten minutes for interviewing and three to five for sharing. Two or more cycles may occur within one lesson. *Literacy application:* This can work especially well with content area

reading instruction. After reading and discussing a manageable amount of social studies material, students may be paired for the interview. They must process and clarify concepts in order to ask and answer the questions.

Think-pair-share. Two students pair up to discuss or write about a topic presented by the teacher, after which they share their ideas with the entire class. *Literacy application:* This strategy can be used to promote writing for reluctant students by having students alternate writing paragraphs or sentences. Both partners are responsible for written revisions. This is especially effective with bilingual, or linguistically different students.

Summary

Cooperative methods usually have a positive effect on student achievement. Students enjoy working and learning together in groups for academic as well as social reasons. When working together toward a common goal, students encourage one another's learning and help their group mates succeed. Group assignments enable learners to work together to discover their own meaning. Cooperative grouping promotes language development, listening skills, and equal participation. The various structures presented in this paper provide a forum in which students make inquiries, discuss topics and issues, criticize constructively, make mistakes, learn to listen to each others opinions, integrate new knowledge with prior knowledge and summarize their ideas in writing. Although it is important to continue independent and whole group learning, incorporating various grouping structures will improve the academic climate and increase learning in the majority of classrooms.

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