Approaches to Implementing Cooperative Learning in the Social Studies Classroom

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Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

—Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Cooperative learning is an old idea, or as some social studies teachers might say, “cooperative learning has a long history.” The Talmud clearly states that in order to learn you must have a learning partner. In the first century, Quintilian argued that students could benefit from teaching one another. The Roman philosopher Seneca advocated cooperative learning through such statements as, qui docet discet (when you teach, you learn twice). Johann Amos Comenius, in the seventeenth century, believed that students would benefit from both teaching and being taught by other students. In the late 1700s, Joseph Lancaster and Andrew Bell made extensive use of cooperative learning groups in England, and the idea was brought to the United States when a Lancasterian school was opened in New York City in 1806. Within the Common School Movement in the United States in the early 1800s there was a strong emphasis on cooperative learning. In the last three decades of the nineteenth century, Colonel Francis Parker brought to his advocacy of cooperative learning enthusiasm, idealism, practicality, and an intense devotion to freedom, democracy, and individuality in the public schools. His fame and success rested on his power to create a classroom atmosphere that was truly cooperative and democratic. Parker’s advocacy of cooperation among students dominated U.S. education through the turn of the century.

Following Parker, John Dewey promoted the use of cooperative learning groups as part of his famous project method in instruction. In the late 1930s, however, schools began to emphasize interpersonal competition. In the late 1960s, individualistic learning began to be used extensively. After forty years of exploring competitive and individualistic learning, and after numerous research studies demonstrating the efficacy of cooperative learning, schools in the United States are returning to cooperative learning.

Enabling Definitions

Cooperation means working together to accomplish shared goals. Within cooperative activities in the social studies classroom, individual students seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and beneficial to all other group members. Cooperative learning means instructionally using small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec 1990). Within cooperative learning groups, students are given two responsibilities: to learn the assigned material and to make sure that all other members of their group do likewise. In cooperative learning situations, students perceive that they can reach their learning goals only if the other students in their learning group also achieve the goals. Students discuss the social studies material with each other, help each other to understand it, assist each other in using the information and abilities appropriately, and encourage each other to work hard.

Cooperative learning groups may be used to teach specific content (formal cooperative learning groups), to ensure active cognitive processing of information during a lecture (informal cooperative learning groups), and to provide long-term support and assistance for academic progress (cooperative base groups) in the classroom (Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec 1990). Any assignment in any curriculum for a student of any age can be done cooperatively.

Teachers create formal cooperative learning groups to complete specific tasks and assignments such as learning material from a textbook, writing reports or themes, investigating and explaining historical events, and reading and interpreting documents, graphs, books, or news articles. Using this type of cooperative group, the teacher introduces the lesson, assigns students to
groups of two to five members, gives students the materials they need to complete the assignment, and assigns roles to individual students. The teacher then explains the task, teaches any concepts or procedures the students need to know to complete the assignment, and structures the cooperation among students. Students work on the assignment until all group members successfully understand the material and complete the group's task. While the students work together, the teacher moves from group to group systematically monitoring their interaction. The teacher intervenes when students do not understand the academic task or when problems arise from working together. After the groups complete the assignment, the teacher evaluates the academic success of each student and has the groups discuss how well they functioned as a team. In working cooperatively, students realize they have a stake in each other's success; they become mutually responsible for each other's learning.

Informal cooperative learning groups are temporary, ad hoc groups used as part of lecturing and direct teaching to focus student attention on the material, create an expectation set and mood conducive to learning, ensure that students cognitively process the content, and provide closure to an instructional session.

Finally, cooperative base groups are long-term groups (lasting an entire semester or year) with a stable membership whose primary responsibility is to give all members the support, encouragement, and assistance they need to progress academically.

Cooperative learning may be contrasted with competitive and individualistic learning. In the competitive classroom, social studies students work against each other to achieve a goal that only one or a few students can attain. Teachers grade students on a curve, which requires them to work faster and more accurately than their peers. Thus, students seek an outcome that is personally beneficial but detrimental to all other students in the class. In the individualistic classroom, students work by themselves to accomplish learning goals unrelated to those of the other students. Individual goals are assigned, students' efforts are evaluated on a fixed set of standards, and students are rewarded accordingly. Consequently, students seek outcomes that are personally beneficial while ignoring as irrelevant the academic achievement of their groupmates and classmates.

In addition to structuring classroom work cooperatively, school administrators or social studies supervisors may structure teachers into cooperative teams. Three types of cooperative teams might exist within a school (Johnson and Johnson 1989b). Collegial support groups are formed to increase teachers' instructional expertise and success. They consist of two to five teachers who meet weekly and discuss how to improve cooperative learning within their classrooms. Teachers are assigned to task forces to plan and implement solutions to schoolwide issues and problems such as curriculum adoption and lunchroom behavior. Faculty meetings, on the other hand, use ad hoc decision-making groups to involve all staff members in important school decisions. The use of cooperative teams at the building level ensures that a congruent cooperative team-based organizational structure will exist within both classrooms and the school.

Cooperative Learning Is Here to Stay

We know a lot about cooperative learning and we have known it for some time. Since 1898, more than 550 experimental and 100 correlational research studies have been conducted on cooperative, competitive, and individualistic efforts. We know more about cooperative learning than we do about lecturing, age grouping, departmentalization, inquiry teaching, critical thinking, starting reading at age six, or the fifty-minute period. We know more about cooperative learning than about almost any other aspect of education.

Teachers can use cooperative learning with confidence at every grade level, in every subject area, and with any task. Research participants have varied as to economic class, age, sex, nationality, and cultural background. A wide variety of research tasks, ways of structuring cooperation, and measures of the dependent variables have been used. Many research workers with markedly varying orientations working in various settings, countries, and decades have conducted the research. The research findings on appropriately implemented cooperative learning groups is both valid and generalizable to a degree rarely found in the educational literature.

Cooperation is a generic human endeavor that affects many instructional outcomes simultaneously. Over the past ninety years, research has focused on such diverse outcomes as achievement, higher-level reasoning, retention, achievement motivation, intrinsic motivation, transfer of learning, interpersonal attraction, social support, friendships, prejudice, valuing differences, social support, self-esteem, social competencies, psychological health, and moral reasoning. These numerous outcomes may be subsumed within three broad categories: effort to achieve, positive interpersonal relationships, and psychological health (see figure 1) (Johnson and Johnson 1989a).

Cooperative learning is here to stay. Because it is based on a profound and strategic theory and because substantial research validates its effectiveness, there probably will never be a time in the future when cooperative learning is not used extensively within educational programs. Because of its effects and likely widespread use in the future, social studies educators need to understand the various approaches to implementing cooperative learning.
Implementing Cooperative Learning in the Social Studies Classroom

We might place approaches to implementing cooperative learning within social studies classrooms on a continuum with conceptual applications at one end and direct applications at the other. Conceptual applications are based on an interaction among theory, research, and practice. Teachers are taught a general conceptual model of cooperative learning that they use to tailor cooperative learning specifically for their circumstances, students, and needs. In essence, teachers are taught an expert system of how to implement cooperative learning to create a unique adaptation. Direct applications are packaged lessons, curricula, and strategies that teachers use in a prescribed manner. The direct approach may be divided into three subcategories: strategy, curriculum package, and lesson approaches.

We might illustrate the difference between conceptual and direct applications by the following example. Practically everyone knows how to run a video cassette recorder. You tune the television to the appropriate channel, turn on the VCR, insert the tape, and press “play.” When the VCR breaks, however, few of us know how to repair it. Most of the things we use, we use as technicians. We can follow the instructions, but we really do not understand how the thing works, we cannot adapt and modify it to our unique circumstances, and we cannot repair it when it breaks. A few of us are engineers in the sense that we have the conceptual knowledge required to modify and adapt the things we use and to repair them when they break. We may train teachers to use cooperative learning as technicians (i.e., following step-by-step instructions) or as engineers (i.e., from a conceptual understanding of cooperative learning and how it needs to be adapted to and implemented within their specific circumstances to gain maximum benefits from its effects).

These two approaches to implementing cooperative learning are not contradictory—they supplement and support each other. A carefully crafted approach to cooperative learning requires a combination of clear conceptual understanding of the essential components of cooperative learning, concrete examples of lessons and strategies, and repeated implementation in classrooms and schools over extended periods of time.

A Conceptual Approach

The conceptual approach requires social studies teachers to learn both a conceptual understanding of cooperative learning (its nature and essential components) and the skills to use that understanding to plan and teach cooperative learning lessons, strategies, and curriculum units uniquely tailored to their specific students and circumstances. Conceptual approaches to cooperative learning have been developed by Elizabeth Cohen (1986) and the authors of this chapter (Johnson 1970; Johnson and Johnson, F. P. 1991; Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec 1990). Cohen based her conceptual principles on expectation-states theory while we base our conceptual principles on the theory of cooperation and competition Morton Deutsch built from Kurt Lewin’s field theory. The conceptual approach assumes that each teacher faces a complex and unique combination of circumstances, students, and needs and, therefore, cooperative learning needs to be adapted and refined uniquely to fit each teacher’s situation. Understanding the essential elements allows teachers to think creatively about cooperative learning and to produce any number of strategies and lessons.

The goal of the conceptual approach is to develop teachers’ expertise in cooperative learning so they can

1. take any lesson in any subject area and structure it cooperatively;
2. practice the use of cooperative learning strategies until they are at a routine and integrated level of use and implement cooperative learning at least 60 percent of the time in their classrooms;
3. describe precisely what they are doing and why they are doing it in order to (a) communicate to others the nature of cooperative learning and (b) teach them how to implement cooperative learning in their classrooms; and
4. apply the principles of cooperation to other settings, such as collegial relationships and faculty meetings.

The conceptual approach is used in all technological arts and crafts. An engineer designing a bridge, for example, applies validated theory to the unique problems imposed by the need for a bridge of a certain
length, to carry specific loads, from a bank of one
unique geological character to a bank of another unique
geological character, in an area with specific winds, tem-
peratures, and susceptibility to earthquakes. Teachers
engage in the same process by (a) learning a conceptual-
ization of essential components of cooperative learning
and (b) applying that conceptual model to their unique
teaching situations, circumstances, students, and instruc-
tional needs. The conceptual approach to implementing
cooperative learning is based on theory that is validated
by research and made operational through the elements
identified as essential to cooperative efforts.

Theory Base for Cooperative Learning:
Where Did It All Come From?

To understand the theory and research on cooper-
aive learning, it helps to know the sources from which
most of it came. In the early 1900s, one of the founders
of the Gestalt School of Psychology, Kurt Koffka, pro-
posed that groups were dynamic wholes in which the
interdependence among members could vary. One of his
colleagues, Kurt Lewin, refined Koffka’s notions in the
1920s and 1930s. Lewin’s insights led him to state that
interdependence among members was the essence of
groups. One of Lewin’s most brilliant graduate students,
Morton Deutsch, took Lewin’s thinking several giant
steps forward when, in the late 1940s, he formulated a
theory of cooperation and competition.

Despite the clarity of Deutsch’s theory, practical
applications were slow to materialize in the 1950s. In
the early 1960s, a high school English teacher and one
of the authors of this article, David Johnson, became
one of Deutsch’s graduate students at Columbia
University. His brother Roger, an elementary school-
teacher at the time, was spending his summers working
with Jerome Bruner and a group of scientists at
Harvard University developing the inquiry-based ESS
science curriculum. David and Roger spent much of
their time together discussing Deutsch’s theory of coop-
eration and its relevance to teaching and to the school
as an organization. In the late 1960s, after Roger and
David became colleagues at the University of
Minnesota, their work extending the Koffka/Lewin/
Deutsch theories and Koffka/Lewin/Deutsch theories to schools took a major leap forward
(see Johnson 1970).

Our work is based on the premise that if students’
learning goals are structured cooperatively, then stu-
dents will assist, encourage, and support each other’s
efforts to achieve. This interaction pattern in turn
results in greater learning, more positive relationships
among students, and increased psychological well-
being. This theory of cooperation, furthermore, can be
applied on three levels: classroom learning (including
the in-service training of educators); teacher teams at
the building level; and administrator teams at the dis-

tict level.

Validated by Research in Actual Classroom Settings

Having a clear, highly practical theory is not enough.
Research must be conducted to validate or nullify the the-
ory. Over the past thirty years, for example, we have con-
ducted more than eighty-five research studies to identify
the essential components that make cooperation work.
Cooperative learning is one of the most empirically vali-
dated instructional procedures available to educators.1

What Makes Cooperative Learning Work?

Social studies educators need to learn the essential ele-
ments of cooperation for at least two reasons. First, they
need to tailor cooperative learning to their unique
instructional needs, circumstances, curricula, subject
areas, and students. Second, they need to diagnose any
problems students have in working together and inter-
vene to increase the effectiveness of the student learning
groups. Simply placing students in groups and telling
them to work together does not in and of itself result in
cooperative effects—or positive effects on students.
Group efforts may go wrong for many reasons. Seating
students together can result in competition at close quar-
ters or give way to individualistic efforts with talking
added. Teachers must understand the essential elements
of cooperation if they are to implement cooperative
learning successfully. Teachers need enough training and
practice on the essential elements of cooperation to
become educational engineers who can take their exist-
ings lessons, curricula, and courses and structure them
collaboratively.

When teachers have real expertise in using coopera-
tive learning, they will structure five essential elements
into instructional activities. Well-structured and poorly
structured cooperative learning lessons in the social
studies classroom at all levels can be distinguished on the
basis of these elements. These essential elements, fur-
thermore, should be carefully structured within all levels of
collaborative efforts.Each learning group is a collaborative
effort, but so is the class as a whole, the school, the

teaching team, and the school district. The five essential
elements are as follows.

1. Positive interdependence The heart of cooperative
learning is positive interdependence. Students must
believe that they sink or swim together. Within every
cooperative lesson, positive goal interdependence must
be established through mutual learning goals. Teachers
must structure the group and the group task so that all
students learn the assigned material and make sure that
their groupmates learn the assigned material. Positive
interdependence can be strengthened in three ways: (a)
providing joint rewards (e.g., if all members of a group
score 90 percent correct or better on the test, each
receives five bonus points); (b) dividing resources equally
among all members; and (c) assigning complementary
roles to each member (e.g., reader, checker, encourager,
and elaborator).
2. **Face-to-face promotive interaction** Once teachers establish positive interdependence, they must ensure that students interact to help each other accomplish the task and promote each other’s success. Students are expected to discuss what they are learning, explain to each other how to solve the assigned problems or complete the assignment, and provide each other with assistance, support, and encouragement. Silent students are uninvolved students who are not contributing to their groupmates' or their own learning. Promoting each other’s success results in both higher achievement and in getting to know each other on both a personal and a professional level.

3. **Individual accountability** The purpose of cooperative learning groups is to strengthen each member. Students learn together so that they can subsequently perform better as individuals. To ensure that each member is strengthened, teachers hold students individually accountable to do their share of the work. The teacher assesses each student’s performance and returns the results to the group and the individual. It is important that the group knows who needs more assistance, support, and encouragement in completing the assignment. It is also important that group members know they cannot hitchhike on the work of others.

4. **Social skills** Contributing to the success of a cooperative effort requires interpersonal and small-group skills. Placing socially unskilled individuals in a group and telling them to cooperate does not guarantee that they will be able to do so effectively. We must teach students social skills for high-quality collaboration and motivate them to use those skills. We must teach leadership, decision making, trust building, communication, and conflict-management skills just as purposefully and precisely as academic skills.

5. **Group processing** Teachers need to ensure that members of each cooperative learning group discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships. Groups need to describe which member actions are helpful and which are unhelpful, and make decisions about which behaviors to continue or change. Appropriate processing enables learning groups to focus on group maintenance, facilitates the learning of social skills, ensures that members receive feedback on their participation, and reminds students to practice collaborative skills consistently. Five of the keys to successful processing are allowing sufficient time for processing to take place, making processing specific rather than vague, maintaining student involvement in processing, reminding students to use their social skills while they process, and ensuring that the teacher has communicated clear expectations about the purpose of processing.

Conceptual understanding and skillful use of cooperative learning are two sides of the same teaching expertise coin. Theory is the cutting edge of practice. Through the attainment of conceptual understanding of how to teach, true teaching genius can emerge and be expressed. The complexity and promise of conceptually understanding cooperative learning make adherence to the guidelines for implementing cooperative learning essential. In short, unless social studies teachers follow the guidelines and criteria, they should not expect to obtain the multitude of positive results cooperative learning strategies can achieve. Once social studies teachers understand and learn the essential elements of cooperative learning, they can fine-tune and adapt it to their specific circumstances, needs, and students.

**Gaining Expertise in Using Cooperative Learning**

James Watson, who won a Nobel Prize as the co-discoverer of the double helix DNA molecule, once stated that nothing new that is really interesting comes without collaboration. Gaining expertise in using cooperative learning is in itself a cooperative process that requires a team effort. Gaining expertise and becoming a skilled user of cooperative learning are extended, complex processes that place both cognitive and emotional demands on teachers.

In order for social studies teachers to implement cooperative learning at a routine-use level (where they can automatically structure a lesson cooperatively without preplanning or conscious thought), they need to gain experience in a step-by-step manner. They need progressively to refine their competencies by

1. planning and teaching a cooperative lesson;
2. assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the lesson;
3. reflecting on how to improve their teaching in the next lesson (thus clarifying the teacher's conceptual understanding);
4. planning and teaching a second cooperative lesson with the modifications suggested by the feedback received about the first; and
5. assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the second lesson, reflecting on how to improve their teaching on the next lesson, and teaching the third lesson. This process should be repeated continually until the person retires from teaching.

A support system is needed to encourage and assist teachers in a long-term, multi-year effort to improve continually their competence in using cooperative learning. With only a moderately difficult teaching strategy, for example, teachers may require from twenty to thirty hours of instruction in its theory, fifteen to twenty demonstrations using it with various students and subjects, and an additional ten to fifteen coaching sessions to attain higher-level skills. For a more difficult teaching strategy like cooperative learning, teachers may need several years of training and support to ensure that they learn it well. We prefer to take three years to train a teacher fully in the fundamentals of cooperative learning, the advanced use of cooperative learning, and the use of
Harvey Firestone (of Firestone Tires) once said that it is only when we develop others that we permanently succeed. To gain expertise in using cooperative learning, teachers must help their colleagues gain expertise. The key to successful implementation of cooperative learning is the use of collegial support groups (Johnson and Johnson 1989b). During training sessions, teachers learn about cooperative learning and the essential elements that make it work. Teachers then transfer this knowledge to their classrooms and maintain their use of cooperative learning for years to come. The success of the training depends on transfer (i.e., teachers trying cooperative learning in their classrooms) and maintenance (i.e., teachers using cooperative learning over a long period of time).

Social studies teachers must engage in cooperative learning for some time before they begin to gain expertise. This usually requires support, encouragement, and assistance from colleagues. Transfer and maintenance, therefore, depend largely on teachers organizing themselves into cooperative teams and collegial support groups that focus on helping all members progressively improve their competence in using cooperative learning.

Alternative Approaches to Implementing Cooperative Learning

At the other end of the continuum are direct approaches to cooperative learning that are relatively inexpensive and take little time to implement. Teachers may be trained to conduct a specific cooperative learning lesson, use a specific cooperative learning curriculum, or use a specific cooperative learning strategy. These direct applications are basically atheoretical. The goal of the direct approach is to train teachers to use step-by-step, prescribed procedures and curriculum materials that teachers have used successfully in other classrooms. The trainer informs the trainees about the procedure, demonstrates or models the procedure, and then the trainee practices the procedure.

Such training is based on a number of assumptions, one of which is that all classrooms and students are basically the same and that, therefore, the same strategy, curriculum, or lesson will be equally effective in all schools. Another assumption is that teachers need to know only the steps involved in using cooperative learning. If we assume teachers repeat the procedures dozens of times, they will become quite skillful technicians. The problem with such technical competence is that it does not enable teachers to be flexible in their implementation and to adapt cooperative learning to new problems.

Direct approaches have focused on specific lessons, strategies, and curriculums. When teachers are trained in how to use cooperative learning from the lesson approach, they are offered a specific lesson structured cooperatively (such as an English lesson on punctuation, a mathematics lesson on long division, or a science lesson on what sinks and what floats) and shown a demonstration of how the lesson is taught. Teachers are then expected to go back to their classrooms and conduct the lesson.

The strategy approach trains teachers to use specific cooperative learning strategies, typically demonstrated with one or more specific lessons. The steps required to implement the strategy are listed. Once teachers learn the strategy, it may be used to build a number of cooperative lessons and integrate them into existing curriculums. Some of the most powerful strategies include the Jigsaw method developed by Elliot Aronson and his colleagues (1978), the Co-op Co-op strategy refined by Spencer Kagan (1988), the Group Project method developed by Sharan and Sharan (1976), and math Groups-of-Four developed by Marilyn Burns (1981). The number of available strategies increases yearly.

The curriculum package approach trains teachers to use a curriculum package within which lessons are structured cooperatively. Teachers are given a preset curriculum that contains all the materials and procedures necessary for implementation in their classrooms. They are trained in how to use them in their own classroom situations. As with all curriculums, the packages tend to be subject area and grade level specific. Dozens of curriculum packages that include instructions for using cooperative learning groups with the lessons are being published. This approach is best represented by the work of David DeVries, Keith Edwards, and Robert Slavin at Johns Hopkins University (Slavin 1986). The packages they have developed include Teams-Games-Tournament, Student Teams-Achievement Divisions, Team-Assisted Instruction, and Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition. While these curriculums are a mixture of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic activities, they are built around or contain numerous cooperative lessons.

Finally, cooperative activities that are related to cooperative learning may be used in the classroom. Teachers may use group-building activities (such as “favorite sports and hobbies,” “pets I wish I had,” and “team juggling”) and cooperative games. Teachers may also have support groups within the classroom and promote class-wide cooperation through class meetings. Although all these activities enhance the effectiveness of cooperative learning activities, they are not considered cooperative learning because they contain no academic goals.

Differences among the Approaches

Although the conceptual and direct approaches to cooperative learning are not contradictory, differences exist for the transfer of training from the workshop to the classroom and the long-term implementation and survival of cooperative learning. Conceptual applications
are based upon theory whereas direct applications are based upon materials and procedures. The conceptual approach promotes research that tests theory general to many situations. Direct approaches promote evaluation studies that are, in essence, case studies demonstrating how well the curriculum or strategy was implemented in a specific instance, but the results do not generalize to other situations and implementations. Conceptual approaches are dynamic because they can be changed and modified on the basis of new research and refinements of the theory. Direct approaches are static in that they remain fixed no matter how the knowledge about cooperative learning changes.

The conceptual approach trains social studies teachers to be engineers who adapt cooperative learning to their specific circumstances, students, and needs. Direct approaches train teachers to be technicians who use the cooperative learning curriculum or strategy without understanding how it works. As engineers, teachers can solve implementation problems and adapt cooperative learning to their specific circumstances, students, and needs. As technicians they cannot. The development of expertise in using cooperative learning depends on understanding cooperation conceptually. The conceptual approach promotes personal commitment by teachers to cooperative learning as they adapt it to their situations. The direct approach does not.

When teachers gain expertise in cooperative learning through conceptual understanding, they become independent of outside experts and can generate new lessons and strategies as the need arises. They can also transfer their use of cooperative learning to improve cooperative collegial relationships, staff meetings, relationships with parents, and committees. They become important figures in the staff development process as they train their colleagues to use cooperative learning. Teachers trained in the direct approaches remain dependent on outside experts, cannot generate new lessons or strategies on their own, cannot transfer cooperation from the classroom to the school, and cannot train their peers (except in a direct way). Finally, the conceptual approach requires continuous support and assistance in gaining expertise in cooperative learning. Direct approaches do not.

Direct approaches have value within the context of long-term implementation of a training program emphasizing conceptual understanding of the essential elements of well-structured cooperative lessons. Without the conceptual context, direct approaches are, in the long run, inadequate at best and counterproductive at worst. Simply presenting a theoretical framework, on the other hand, is also inadequate. An effective training program requires a combination of a conceptual understanding of the essential elements of cooperative learning, concrete examples of lessons and strategies, opportunities for practice with feedback, and implementation over an extended period of time in the teacher’s own classroom.

Summary and Conclusions

We may place approaches to implementing cooperative learning on a continuum with conceptual applications at one end and direct applications at the other. In conceptual applications, social studies teachers learn a general conceptual model of cooperative learning. This model integrates the essential elements of positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, social skills, and group processing. Teachers are assisted in tailoring cooperative learning specifically to their personal school and subject circumstances, students, and needs. Direct applications consist of packaged lessons, curricula, and strategies they can use in a prescribed manner. The direct approach can be divided into three subcategories. Teachers can adopt a strategy that is aimed at using cooperative learning in a specific subject area for students of a certain age or grade (also labeled the strategy approach). Teachers might also adopt a curriculum package aimed at a specific subject area and grade level (i.e., the curriculum package approach), or they can replicate a lesson they observed another teacher (i.e., the lesson approach).

As described here, appropriate cooperative learning is a complex instructional procedure that requires conceptual knowledge as well as the skills of using specific lessons, curricula, and strategies. If cooperative learning is going to be institutionalized within a social studies department, school or district, teachers must become experts in the conceptual system of understanding how to structure cooperative lessons and how to solve the problems of adapting cooperative learning to their specific circumstances, students, and needs. Simply presenting or reading about this theoretical framework and the practical guidelines is not enough. There are no quick solutions or shortcuts to becoming an effective cooperative learning social studies educator.

Finally, gaining expertise in cooperative learning ultimately requires years of effort. Such long-term training and implementation programs require a support system. Collegial support groups at the building level and cooperative learning within the classroom go together. Each enhances the effectiveness of the other.

Note

1For a review of this research, see, for example, Johnson and Johnson (1989a).

References


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