Cooperative Learning in Social Studies: Balancing the Social and the Studies

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Cooperative learning has long been used in social studies. John Dewey’s Project Method of the 1920s, primarily used in social studies, was certainly not the first proposal for the use of cooperative learning in this subject. In recent years teachers have used an astonishing variety of cooperative learning methods in social studies classrooms, and use of these methods is expanding rapidly.

Two broad reasons justify using cooperative learning. First, these methods enhance and deepen students’ learning of the formal curriculum. Second, they help to accomplish affective goals. These include traditional affective goals of social studies such as commitment to civic values and empathy for other peoples in other cultures and eras. Other affective goals not unique to social studies are increased positive attitudes toward the subject, increased self-confidence in learning new content, improved relationships among students (particularly in race relations), friendly attitudes toward mainstreamed students, prosocial values, kindness and altruism toward others, and the ability to work productively with others.

Cooperative learning can indeed accomplish all of these academic, social, and affective goals. Simply allowing students to work together, however, is not enough. Experimental research in schools over the past twenty years has shown that the way teachers structure and implement cooperative learning methods affects the outcomes, especially achievement outcomes. Improvement in social studies must attend both to the social and to the studies. This chapter discusses research on the cooperative learning methods most often investigated and used in social studies with an eye toward describing key principles and components necessary to make cooperative learning approaches most effective for social and achievement goals.

Cooperative Learning Methods

Dozens of specific cooperative learning methods are available with names and teachers’ manuals or other how-to materials; hundreds of informal variations of these are available as well. The small number of strategies that have been empirically compared to traditionally taught control groups and applied in the teaching of social studies is briefly described below.

Student Teams-Achievement Divisions

In STAD (Slavin 1978, 1986), teachers assign students to four-member learning teams that are mixed by performance level, gender, and ethnicity. The teacher first presents a lesson and then students work within their teams to make sure that all team members have learned the lesson. Finally, all students take individual quizzes on the material without helping one another.

The teacher compares students’ quiz scores to their past averages and awards points based on the degree to which students can meet or exceed their earlier individual performances. The teacher then adds these points to form team scores. Teams that meet certain preestablished criteria may earn certificates or other rewards. The whole cycle of activities, from teacher presentation to team practice to quiz, usually takes three to five class periods.

STAD has been used in a wide variety of subjects, from mathematics to language arts to social studies, and has been used from grade 2 through college. It is most appropriate for teaching well-defined objectives with single right answers, such as specific locational characteristics in geography and some map skills, knowledge of events in history, and principles of economics or government.

Teams-Games-Tournament

Teams-Games-Tournament (DeVries and Slavin 1978; Slavin 1986) was the first of the Johns Hopkins cooperative learning methods. It uses the same teacher presentation and teamwork as STAD, but replaces the quizzes with weekly tournaments in which students...
compete with members of other teams to contribute points to their own team scores.

### Jigsaw

Elliot Aronson and his colleagues (1978) originally designed Jigsaw. According to Aronson’s Jigsaw method, teachers assign students to six-member teams to work on academic material that the teacher has broken down into sections. For example, a biography might be divided into early life, first accomplishments, major setbacks, later life, and influences on history. Each team member reads an assigned section. Next, members of different teams who have studied the same sections meet in expert groups to discuss their sections. Then students return to their original teams and take turns teaching their teammates about their respective sections of the material. Since the only way students can learn other sections is to listen carefully to their teammates, they are motivated to support and show interest in one another’s work.

In Slavin’s (1986) modification of Jigsaw, Jigsaw II, students work in four- or five-member teams as in TGT and STAD. Instead of each student being assigned a unique section, all students read a common narrative, such as a book chapter, a short story, or a biography. Each student then receives a subtopic related to this narrative on which to become an expert. Students with the same topics meet in expert groups to discuss them, after which they return to their original teams to teach what they have learned to their teammates. Students then take individual quizzes, which result in team scores based on the improvement score system of STAD. Teams that meet preset standards may earn certificates or other suitable rewards. Kagan (1989) has described many more variations of the basic Jigsaw format.

### Learning Together

David and Roger Johnson (1987) developed the Learning Together model of cooperative learning at the University of Minnesota. The methods they have investigated involve students working in four- or five-member heterogeneous groups on assignment sheets. The groups hand in a single sheet and receive praise and rewards based on the group product. Their methods emphasize team-building activities before students begin working together as well as regular discussions within groups to assess how well they are working together.

### Group Investigation

Group Investigation, refined by Shlomo Sharan at the University of Tel-Aviv (Sharan and Sharan 1976), is a general classroom organization plan in which students work in small groups using cooperative inquiry, group discussion, and cooperative planning and projects. Using this method, students form groups of two to six members. After choosing subtopics from a unit being studied by the entire class, the groups break their subtopics further into individual tasks and carry out the activities necessary to enable the group collectively to prepare group reports. Each group then makes a presentation or display to communicate its findings to the entire class. Kagan (1989) has developed a modification of Group Investigation called Co-op Co-op.

### Research on Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning methods are among the most extensively evaluated alternatives to traditional instruction in use in schools today. More than seventy high-quality studies have evaluated various cooperative learning methods over periods of at least four weeks in regular elementary and secondary schools; sixty-seven of these studies have measured effect on student achievement (Slavin 1990). All of these studies compared effects of cooperative learning to those of traditionally taught control groups on measures of the same objectives pursued in all classes. Teachers and classes were either randomly assigned to cooperative or control conditions, or they were matched on pretest achievement level and other factors. Only a few of the studies involved social studies, but studies involving other subjects have clear implications for teaching social studies. The following selections review the research in general, and highlight studies in social studies classrooms.

### Academic Achievement

Of sixty-seven studies on the achievement effects of cooperative learning, thirty-nine (58 percent) have found in the cooperative classes significantly greater achievement than in the control classes. Twenty-seven studies (40 percent) resulted in no differences. In only one study did a control group outperform the experimental group. The effects of cooperative learning, however, vary considerably according to the method used. Two elements must be present if cooperative learning is to be effective: group goals and individual accountability (Slavin 1990). That is, groups must be working to achieve some common preset goal or to earn rewards or recognition, and the success of the group must depend on the individual learning of each group member.

In studies of methods employing these two elements, effects on achievement have been consistently positive; thirty-seven out of forty-four such studies (84 percent) found significantly positive achievement effects. In contrast, only four of twenty-three studies (17 percent) of methods lacking group goals and individual accountability found positive effects on student achievement. Two of those four were studies of Group Investigation in Israel (Sharan et al. 1984; Sharan and Shachar 1988). In Group Investigation, students in each group are responsible for one unique part of the group’s overall task, ensuring individual accountability. Even though no specific group rewards are used in the Group Investigation...
method, the group evaluation appears to serve the same purpose.

Why are group goals and individual accountability so important? To understand this, consider the alternatives. In many forms of cooperative group activities, students work together to complete a single worksheet or to solve a single problem together. In such cases, there is little reason for more able students to take time to explain what is going on to the less able groupmates, to answer their questions, to help them succeed, or to ask their opinions. When the group task is merely to do or complete something, rather than to learn something, the participation of less able students may be seen as interference rather than help. It may be easier in these circumstances for students to give each other answers rather than to explain concepts or skills to one another until all students learn what is being studied.

In contrast, when the group’s task is to ensure that every group member has learned something well, it is in the interest of every group member to spend time explaining concepts to their groupmates. Research by Webb (1985) on students’ behaviors within cooperative groups has consistently found that the students who gain most from cooperative work are those who give and receive elaborated explanations. Webb found that giving and receiving answers without explanations, on the other hand, were negatively related to achievement gain. Clear group goals and individual accountability motivate students to offer explanations to each other and to take each other’s learning seriously, instead of simply giving each other answers.

Cooperative learning methods generally work equally well for all types of students. Although occasional studies find particular advantages for high or low achievers, boys or girls, and so on, the great majority find equal benefits for all types of students. Some teachers are concerned that cooperative learning will hold back high achievers. The research provides absolutely no support for this claim; high achievers gain from cooperative learning (relative to high achievers in traditional classes) just as much as do low and average achievers (Slavin 1991).

Research on the achievement effects of cooperative learning has more often involved grades 3–9 than 10–12. Studies at the senior high level, however, are about as positive as those at earlier grade levels, but a need exists for more research at that level. Cooperative learning methods have been equally successful in urban, rural, and suburban schools, and with students of various ethnic groups (although a few studies have found particularly positive effects for African-American students; see, for example, Slavin and Oickle 1981).

The findings of research on cooperative learning in social studies have been similar to those in other disciplines. Allen and VanSickle (1984) found strong positive effects of STAD on achievement in 9th grade geography. DeVries, Edwards, and Wells (1974) found similar effects for TGT in grade 10–12 U.S. history classes. Yager, Johnson, Johnson, and Snider (1986) found that students in Learning Together classes learned and retained more from a unit on transportation than did students taught individually.

Group Investigation has been particularly effective in social studies. The most successful of the Group Investigation studies was an eighteen-week experiment involving Israeli 8th graders studying geography and history (Sharan and Shachar 1988).

Achievement effects of Jigsaw appear to depend on the form of the program used. Studies of the original Jigsaw model, including an Israeli study involving history (Rich, Amir, and Slavin 1986), have shown few achievement effects. Studies of Jigsaw II, which includes the group goal and individual accountability elements, however, have found positive achievement effects. These include two studies involving social studies classes. One, by Mattingly and VanSickle (1991), involved an integrated unit on Asia taught in a U.S. high school in Germany. The other took place in Toronto and involved units on the Inuit people and the history and geography of Newfoundland (Ziegler 1981).

**Intergroup Relations**

Research on cooperative learning methods has found consistent positive effects of cooperative learning on intergroup relations. In most of the research on intergroup relations, students were asked to list their best friends at the beginning of the study and again at the end. The number of friendship choices students made outside their own ethnic groups constituted the measure of intergroup relations. Positive effects on intergroup relations have been found for STAD, TGT, Jigsaw, Learning Together, and Group Investigation (Slavin 1985).

Two of these studies, one on STAD and one on Jigsaw II, included follow-ups of intergroup friendships several months after the end of the studies. Both found that students who had been in cooperative learning classes still named significantly more friends outside their own ethnic groups than did students who had been in control classes. Two studies of Group Investigation (Sharan et al. 1984; Sharan and Shachar 1988) found that students’ improved attitudes and behaviors toward classmates of different ethnic backgrounds included classmates who had not shared cooperative group work.

The U.S. studies of cooperative learning and intergroup relations involved African-American, European-American, and (in a few cases) Mexican-American students. A study of Jigsaw II by Ziegler (1981) took place in Toronto, where the major ethnic groups were Anglo-Canadians and children of recent European immigrants. The Sharan (Sharan et al. 1984; Sharan and Shachar 1988) studies of Group Investigation took place in Israel.
and involved friendships between Jews of European and Middle Eastern backgrounds.

Mainstreaming

Research on cooperative learning and mainstreaming has focused on the academically handicapped child. One study used STAD to attempt to integrate students performing two years or more below the level of their peers into the social structure of the classroom. The use of STAD significantly reduced the degree to which the normal-progress students rejected their mainstreamed classmates, and increased the academic achievement and self-esteem of all students, both the mainstreamed students and their normal-progress peers. Other studies have revealed similar effects (Ballard et al. 1977; Cooper et al. 1980). In addition, one study of social studies in a self-contained school for emotionally disturbed adolescents found that the use of TGT increased positive interactions and friendships among students (Slavin 1977). Five months after the study ended, the research indicated that these positive interactions continued more often in the former TGT classes than in the control classes. In a study in a similar setting, Janke (1978) found that emotionally disturbed students were more on task, better behaved, and had better attendance in TGT classes than in control classes.

Self-Esteem

Several researchers working on cooperative learning techniques have found that these methods increase students' self-esteem. Significant improvements in self-esteem have been found for TGT and STAD (Slavin 1990), for Jigsaw (Blaney et al. 1977), and for the three methods combined (Slavin and Karweit 1981).

Other Outcomes

Research has indicated that in addition to effects on achievement, positive intergroup relations, greater acceptance of mainstreamed students, and self-esteem, effects of cooperative learning have been found on a variety of other important educational outcomes. These include enjoyment of school, developing peer norms in favor of doing well academically, feeling that the individual has control over his or her own fate in school, time on task, and cooperativeness and altruism (see Slavin 1990). TGT (DeVries and Slavin 1978) and STAD (Slavin 1977; Janke 1978) have been found to have positive effects on students' time on task. One study found that students having low socioeconomic status and at risk of becoming delinquent who worked in cooperative groups in 6th grade had better attendance records, fewer contacts with the police, and more positive behavioral ratings by teachers in 7th through 11th grades than did control students (Hartley 1976). Another study, implementing forms of cooperative learning with students beginning in kindergarten and continuing through the 4th grade, found that students who had participated within well-structured cooperative groups resolved interpersonal conflicts more effectively, expressed more support for democratic values, and scored significantly higher than control students on measures of supportive, friendly, and prosocial behaviors (Solomon et al. 1990).

Balancing the Social and the Studies in Social Studies

Research on the use of cooperative learning in social studies and other subjects shows that these methods have great potential for teaching a wide variety of social studies topics while enhancing an even wider variety of social skills and prosocial attitudes. Putting students into groups and asking them to work together, however, is not enough. Positive social outcomes have been found for a wide variety of methods, but achievement gains appear to depend on the use of group goals and individual accountability. Group success must depend on the learning or performance of every student, not on a single group product.

Social studies lends itself in particular to cooperative learning because, for one thing, many explicit social goals are key objectives of the social studies. It simply does not make sense to teach students about civic, democratic values while they routinely sit in rows listening passively to a teacher. Another reason that cooperative learning is particularly appropriate in social studies is that social studies objectives are so varied. A teacher can use STAD or Learning Together to teach information and skills, Jigsaw to help students learn from written sources, and Group Investigation for group projects and reports. A creative teacher can devise dozens of variations of these and other cooperative learning techniques to facilitate learning aligned with a wide range of social studies objectives.

Used in a thoughtful and informed way, cooperative learning can help create a social studies program in which students are actively, rather than passively, engaged—debating, exploring, questioning, teaching, assessing, experiencing knowledge—to achieve equally the social and the studies goals of a comprehensive social studies curriculum.

Note

See also Thelen (1960), Joyce and Weil (1980), and Sharan and Sharan (1992) for more information on the Group Investigation model.

References


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