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

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Walk through any educational environment, from preschool to postsecondary, and you are bound to see examples of cooperative learning in action. Cooperative learning is applied in a wide range of settings, with all age groups, in diverse disciplines. A national survey of US teachers conducted in 1993 found that 79% of elementary teachers and 62% of middle school teachers reported making some sustained use of cooperative learning (Puma, Jones, Rock and Fernandez, 1993). In social studies, the use of cooperative learning predates John Dewey's Project Method of the 1920's. In present-day social studies classrooms, cooperative learning appears especially frequently, in a wide variety of forms.

The popularity of cooperative learning methods in social studies classrooms is due, at least in part, to their effects on the social development of students. In addition to strengthening and expanding students' grasp of the formal curriculum, they impact affective outcomes inherent to social studies –outcomes beyond curriculum mastery. These include empathy toward other peoples, in other cultures (and eras), ideas of citizenship, and critical thinking.

Although cooperative learning is a powerful tool with which to accomplish academic, social, and affective goals, it takes more than simply allowing children to work together in groups, an activity to which the cooperative learning label is often misguidedly affixed. More than twenty-five years of experimental research in schools indicates that outcomes, particularly achievement outcomes, are affected by how teachers structure and implement cooperative learning methods. One can think about effective use of cooperative learning in social studies as being attentive to both the *social* and the *studies*.

This chapter begins with a review of those cooperative learning methods that have been most researched. Following this is a discussion of the elements of those methods proven to impact achievement and social goals, with an emphasis on strategies that have been applied in the social studies, and that have been researched in comparison with traditionally taught groups.

Cooperative Learning Methods

Teachers have access to any number of cooperative learning methods, many of which are specific and come with training, manuals, or how-to materials, and many less formal variations. The most frequently researched methods used in the social studies are described below.

Student Teams-Achievement Divisions

In four-member heterogeneous learning teams, mixed by performance level, gender, and ethnicity, students work together to make sure that each team member has learned a lesson presented by the teacher. The cycle of activities that constitutes STAD (Slavin, 1995) begins with a teacher presentation and then involves a period of group study, in which students work to make sure that they and their teammates have mastered the content. The lesson concludes with quizzes on the material covered by that lesson. Students take the quizzes individually, without helping one another. Quizzes are scored, and each student is awarded points based on having met or exceeded his or her previous score. Team scores represent the sum of the members' points. Teams earn certificates or other awards by meeting preestablished criteria.

STAD, a cycle of activities that takes three to five class periods, has been used in second grade through college classrooms, and in a wide range of subjects, including social studies. It is best suited to teaching well-defined objectives, and material for which there will be a single right answer. In the social studies, it could be used as a strategy to teach map skills, geography, events in history, or economic and government principles.

Teams-Games-Tournament

Teams-Games-Tournament (DeVries and Slavin, 1978; Slavin, 1995) resembles STAD, except that the quiz component has been replaced by weekly tournaments. Students compete with members of other teams to gain points for their own teams' score.

Jigsaw

In Jigsaw (Aronson et al, 1978; Aronson and Shelley, 1997), student teams of six work on academic material that has been divided into sections by the teacher. Each team member is responsible for a particular section. For example, if the material assigned were an historical event, one team member might be assigned a section on social context, one might be responsible for timeline, another might be responsible for long term effects, and the other teammates might each be assigned a section on key participants. Each student reads his or her assigned section, after which the class reconfigures into "expert groups". Expert groups consist of the students responsible for a particular section in their respective teams. After expert groups discuss their sections, students return to their original teams, to teach that section to their teammates. This strategy encourages teammates to support each other's work. It is only by listening carefully to each other that team members can learn about the other sections, and understand how their piece fits into a larger puzzle.

There have been many modificaions of Jigsaw, several of which are described by Spencer Kagan (1995). Jigsaw II is a modification made to Jigsaw by Slavin (1995). In this method, students work in four to five-member teams, as in TGT and STAD. All students begin by reading a common narrative such as a story, textbook chapter, or biography, before being assigned subtopics on which to become experts. Students reconfigure into expert groups based on common subtopics. Having discussed the subtopics, students return to their original teams to share what they have learned with teammates. Finally, students take individual quizzes. Improvement on quiz scores results in points, which

are brought back to the team to determine a team score, as in STAD. Certificates or other rewards are made based on predetermined criteria.

Learning Together

A team-generated work product, as opposed to individual products, is one of the distinguishing factors of the Learning Together model, developed by David and Roger Johnson (1994) at the University of Minnesota. In Learning Together, students in a heterogeneous, four- or five-member group work on a single assignment sheet, which can earn them praise and rewards. There is an emphasis on team-building activities prior to group work, as well as regular within-group dialogue to determine how well the students are functioning together.

Group Investigation

A general classroom organization plan, Group Investigation requires students to work in small groups and to use cooperative inquiry, group discussion, and cooperative planning and projects. This method was refined by Shlomo Sharan at the University of Tel Aviv (Sharan and Sharan, 1992). A unit is studied by the entire class, and students in groups of two to six select subtopics from this unit. The groups then divide their subtopics into individual tasks, and work collectively towards a group report. These reports are presented or displayed for the benefit of the rest of the class. Kagan (1995) developed Co-op Co-op, a variation of Group Investigation.

Research on Cooperative Learning

Among alternative methods to traditional instruction, cooperative learning is perhaps the method most extensively researched. A 1995 review by Slavin summarized the results of ninety-nine studies that have rigorously evaluated the effects of cooperative learning. Sixty seven compared achievement among students taught in regular elementary or secondary schools using cooperative learning, with students in traditionally taught control groups (with random assignment to cooperative or control conditions, or with controls matched on pretest achievement and other factors). All of these studies used measures of objectives pursued by both cooperative and control classes, and followed students over a

period of at least four weeks. Although only a few of these studies involved social studies, other studies have clear implications for the teaching of social studies.

Academic Achivement

Thirty-nine of the sixty-seven studies on cooperative learning and student achievement (58 per cent) found that achievement is significantly greater for students in cooperative learning classes, compared to control classes. No differences were found in twenty-seven of the studies (40 per cent). In the one remaining study, a control group outperformed the cooperative learning group.

The method of cooperative learning that is used has a considerable impact on the effectiveness of cooperative learning. For example, if we examine studies of cooperative learning that included both group goals and individual accountability, we find significant positive achievement effects. Of these studies, thirty-seven out of forty-four (84 per cent) show significant positive achievement affects. Only four of twenty-three studies (17 per cent) of cooperative learning methods that did *not* use these components found significantly positive effects on student achievement. Group Investigation in Israel was the subject of two of those four studies (Sharan et al. 1984; Sharan and Shachar 1988). In this classroom organizational plan, students in each group are responsible for a discrete part of the group's overall assignment, ensuring individual accountability. It seems as though a group evaluation took the place of group rewards, and so Group Investigation was perhaps operating with both components. The evidence then, suggests that group goals and individual accountability are critical components of effective cooperative learning strategies. (Slavin, 1990; O'Donnell, 1997). In other words, groups must be working to achieve a common preset goal, reward, or recognition, and this recognition must rely on individual learning by each group member.

When cooperative learning is considered without group goals and individual accountability, it becomes clear why these components are so important. For example, in some forms of cooperative learning, students work in groups to complete a single task or product. Under such circumstances, it is unclear what might motivate more able students

to invest time and energy in explaining material to be learned to less able group members. It is unclear whether any mechanism would ensure that less able members participate or feel involved and valued. It is also unclear how teachers could be certain that learning was taking place for all students, when the sole purpose of the group is to complete something. A number of scholars have argued that social and or cultural variables may under some circumstances foster group norms which motivate such 'group centric' behavior (Dill and Boykin, 2000; Boykin, Jagers, Ellison, and Albury, 1997; Johnson and Johnson, 1985), however, the evidence to date calls for a more pragmatic approach to motivating students.

When a cooperative learning group is tasked with ensuring that each member understands the material, there is incentive for each group member to invest time and energy learning from and explaining to other members. Research on student behavior in cooperative groups (Webb, 1992; Rosenshine and Meister, 1994) has found that in fact, those group members who gain most from cooperative work are those that give and receive expanded, or elaborated, explanations. Webb's research consistently found that when students gave or received answers without explanation, there was a negative impact on achievement. When groups are given clear goals, and group members are individually accountable, students are motivated to take each other's learning seriously.

All types of students benefit from cooperative learning methods. Teachers are sometimes concerned that cooperative learning will hold back their high achievers, however, research on cooperative learning does not support this belief. Although occasional studies have found particular benefits for high achievers or low achievers, boys or girls, etc., most studies find equal benefits for all students involved. Research has shown that in cooperative learning classes, high achievers gain as much as average and low achievers (Slavin 1991).

Most research on cooperative learning has involved students in grades 3-9, however, studies of outcomes at the senior high school level are generally as positive as studies at the earlier levels. Studies at the postsecondary level also generally show positive effects;

however, there is a need for more rigorous studies of cooperative learning beyond the ninth grade, and in colleges and universities. In addition to showing positive results across educational levels, cooperative learning methods have proven to be equally effective in urban, suburban, and rural schools, and with students of various ethnic groups. Some studies have actually found particularly positive effects for African-American students; see, for example, Slavin and Oickle (1981).

The positive effects of cooperative learning in social studies mirror those reported in other subject areas. In 9th grade geography, Allen and VanSickle (1984) found that STAD produced strong positive effects. U.S. history classes experienced similar effects when DeVries, Edwards, and Wells (1974) studied the use of TGT in this setting. Students in 'Learning Together' classes, studied by Yager, Johnson, Johnson, and Snider (1986) retained more information from a unit in transportation, than did students that were taught in a traditional setting.

Group Investigation has had particularly positive effects in the social studies. The most positive of this research followed Israeli 8th graders studying geography and history in an eighteen week experiment (Sharan and Shachar 1988).

For Jigsaw, achievement effects seem to be related to the form of the program used. Few achievement effects were shown for the original model (see, for example, Lucker et al., 1976; Rich, Amir, and Slavin, 1996). Jigsaw II, which uses group goals and individual accountability, has had positive achievement effects. This research includes two social studies examples. Mattingly and VanSickle (1991) studied an integrated unit on Asia that was taught in a US high school in Germany. Ziegler (1981) studied the achievement of Toronto students on units about the Inuit people and the history and geography of Newfoundland.

Intergroup Relations

Research has consistently shown that cooperative learning methods have a positive impact on intergroup relations. Most of this research involves students listing their best

friends at the start of the study, and again at the end. Intergroup relations was determined by the number of friends that a student listed from outside his or her own ethnic group. STAD, TGT, Jigsaw, Learning Together, and Group Investigation have all shown positive effects on intergroup relations (Slavin, 1985).

Improving intergroup relations is central to the overarching agenda of social studies. Social studies curricula are designed to foster better understanding among diverse communities and cultures around the world and among groups that exist side by side. Traditional social studies curricula promote such understanding through content and factual knowledge. According to current research on intergroup relations, improved relations among groups is best achieved through contact, and only through contact where members of different groups are of equal status and have shared goals (Battisch, 1994). Traditional classroom practices allow for little direct, supervised contact, and where this contact exists, it is usually competitive in nature. Cooperative learning techniques can enrich social studies by encouraging children to develop skills and attitudes which facilitate understanding while providing then the opportunity to interact with others in the types of circumstances known to enhance intergroup relations.

Studies of cooperative learning and intergroup relations in the US have involved African-American, European-American, and, in some cases, Hispanic students. In one of these studies, which focused on STAD, and in a Toronto study of Jigsaw II that involved Anglo-Canadians and children of recent European immigrants (Ziegler, 1981), intergroup friendships were determined several months after the studies' conclusion. In both studies, students who had been in cooperative learning classes continued to name significantly more friends from outside their own ethnic groups, compared to students who had been in control classes. In two studies of Group Investigation conducted in Israel (Sharan et al. 1984; Sharan and Shachar 1988), friendship patterns between Jewish students of European and Middle Eastern backgrounds was examined. Results showed that the improved attitude and behavior of students towards classmates of different ethnic groups extended beyond just those classmates that had been involved in the cooperative group work.

Inclusion

Research on academically handicapped children has been the focus of research on cooperative learning and inclusion or mainstreaming. In a study of STAD in which students performing two years or more below peer level were integrated into the classroom social structure, there was a significant reduction in the degree to which normal-progress students rejected their mainstreamed peers. In addition, academic achievement and self-esteem increased for all students (Ballard et al. 1977; Cooper et al. 1980). One study of social studies in a self-contained classroom for emotionally disturbed adolescents found that positive interactions and friendships among students increased when TGT was used as a teaching strategy (Slavin, 1977). Five months after the conclusion of the study, students who had been in TGT classes continued these positive interactions more often than in control classes. Janke (1978) conducted a study in a similar setting, in which he found that emotionally disturbed students in TGT classes were more often on task, better behaved, and had better attendance, compared with similar students in control classes. As with inter-ethnic/cultural group relations, cooperative learning provides equal status shared goal interactions among normal-progress students and their academically handicapped peers. Thus, again an important social studies agenda can be served with the implementation of cooperative learning methods.

Other Outcomes

Not only has research found positive effects of cooperative learning on achievement, intergroup relations, and acceptance of mainstream students, but effects have also been found on other important outcomes. An increase in self esteem has been noted by several researchers who study cooperative learning methods. In particular, there have been significant improvements in self esteem for students in TGT and STAD classrooms (Slavin, 1995), Jigsaw classrooms (Blaney et al., 1977), and for classrooms in which the three methods were combined (Slavin and Kaarweit, 1981). Other outcomes affected positively by cooperative learning 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, cooperativeness and altruism (Slavin 1995). Research has shown that TGT (DeVries and Slavin, 1978) and STAD (Slavin, 1977; Janke, 1978) have positive effects on students' time on task. One particularly encouraging study followed students in 7th through 11th grades, with low socioeconomic status, and at risk of becoming delinquent. Results from this study found that those students who worked in cooperative groups had better attendance records, fewer contacts with police, and more positive behavioral ratings by teachers, compared to control students (Hartley, 1976). Another study which implemented various forms of cooperative learning with students starting in kindergarten and continuing through the 4th grade, found more effective resolution of personal conflicts, more support expressed for democratic values, and higher scores on measures of supportive, friendly, and prosocial behaviors among students who had participated in well-structured cooperative groups (Solomon et al., 1990).

Balancing the *Social* and the *Studies* in Social Studies

Students in social studies as other disciplines can benefit from cooperative learning. Research on cooperative learning in social studies and other settings has demonstrated the potential of this strategy to help students learn content and, at the same time, improve social skills and prosocial attitudes. It is important to note, however, that grouping students and telling them to work together is not enough. While a wide variety of cooperative learning methods have shown positive social outcomes, achievement gains appear to rely on group goals and accountability. It is imperative that group success depends on the learning and performance of every student.

Social studies is a particularly appropriate forum for cooperative learning, since explicit social goals are often included among desirable outcomes for this discipline. Teaching civic values and democracy to rows of passively listening students does not make sense. Different forms of cooperative learning can work in the social studies classroom to accommodate a wide variety of purposes. For example, STAD or Learning Together can be used to teach information and skills, Jigsaw can help students learn from texts, and Group Investigation can be used for group projects and reports. A creative teacher can

develop any number of variations of these to align student learning with social studies objectives.

Cooperative learning, when used in a thoughtful and informed way, can fill a social studies classroom with students who are debating, exploring, questioning, teaching, assessing, and experiencing knowledge –who are actively engaged learners. A classroom like this embodies the *social* and the *studies* that are part of a comprehensive social studies curriculum.

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