

Who are we?

We are a group of Quad Cities-area parents, teachers, and community members brought together by the desire to support efforts that more fully include children with disabilities in our area schools. This quarterly newsletter is dedicated to enhancing the education of all our children by providing a place to celebrate successes and offering a forum to discuss the challenges associated with moving towards full inclusion.

IN

Inclusion News

Spring 2007

Call to Action

The mission of *IN* is to provide a forum for sharing ideas and resources related to inclusive education in Illinois and Iowa. To help us fulfill our mission, we welcome the following from you:

- √ Resources you've found helpful for parents and teachers.
- √ Success stories of inclusive experiences.
- √ Things you wish someone had told you sooner!
- √ Questions you'd like answered.

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We also are accepting donations to help fund future issues of *IN*. Checks can be made out to *IN* and sent to the above address. Thank you!

Cooperative Learning

by Leah Panther

"Tom*, what character did your group choose?" Mrs. Green asked the high school freshman whose hand, flaying wildly in the air, looked like it was ready to take flight. As the teacher of a first period high school English class, it would seem a rare thing for a student to be overwhelmingly excited at giving an answer. Instead, the class was wide-awake, engaged, and whispering frantically to their group mates in an attempt to determine the right answer.

The typical American classroom is slowly incorporating the idea of cooperative learning. At its roots, cooperative learning is a teaching strategy that promotes mutual learning through structured student groups. These groups ideally range from two to four students (Gabler & Schroeder, 2003) who work together on assignments, projects, and even games under the guidance of a teacher. This technique steers away from curriculum-driven education and instead focuses on students learning from each other. With such high amounts of interaction, students are often questioning both their peers and themselves challenging the entire group to rise to a new level of understanding.

As Tom responds for his group in Mrs. Green's class, he is one of the students actively participating in cooperative learning. He may not realize the benefits he is reaping, but his future test scores are likely to reflect it. Cooperative learning is not a new phase in education. It has been used for decades, but its benefits for inclusive classrooms are becoming increasingly apparent. By working hands-on with the information in cooperative groups, students have

- increased retention (Johnson & Johnson as cited in Gabler & Schroeder, 2003 and Slavin as cited in Gabler & Schroeder, 2003) because they are actively engaged
- higher motivation and more positive attitudes towards school (Johnson et al. as cited in Gabler & Schroeder 2003) since they are intrinsically bound to the information
- and a higher sense of self worth (Johnson & Johnson as cited in Gabler & Schroeder, 2003 and Slavin as cited in Gabler & Schroeder, 2003) since they are helping to accomplish a task.

In inclusive classrooms, the use of cooperative groups allows students with disabilities increased access to core curriculum and increased opportunities to practice social skills with typical peers (Putnam, 1993).

Cooperative Learning

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There are many cooperative learning structures that teachers can implement. Using a more formal approach, teachers may plan the activities, give roles to each of the group members, and closely monitor progress. This could be utilized for a science project, small group discussion or performance of a scene from a play. Another way to structure cooperative groups is through a more temporary group placement with short-term goals, such as producing an experiment or playing a review game.

Conversely, base groups can be used as a longer term strategy where the group could exist for months or more. For elaborate projects, research papers, or large scale art projects, these groups increase the support and communication between group members since they are together for such a long period of time. Academic controversy (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1988) is another method of structuring cooperative learning activities. Teachers or students present topics that may cause controversy between groups and, like a reflective discussion, the students must present the different sides and arguments before coming to a consensus.

Assigning students to cooperative groups is very important to the groups' success in inclusive classrooms. For

short term activities, having the students choose a partner, being grouped by their seating arrangement, or randomly assigning numbers are all legitimate grouping methods. Constantly varying the groups is a way to encourage class unity and community. For many longer or more complex cooperative learning opportunities, creating heterogeneous groups of high and low achieving students allows them to respectively teach and learn from each other. It brings different points of view to the group which, depending on the assignment, can be beneficial to the results. Homogeneous groups formed by ability or gender could negatively single out certain groups of students; in most cases this type of grouping should be avoided by pre-assigning groups.

Cooperative learning can be used throughout the curriculum. Whenever an elaborate project is assigned, it is an ideal time for groups to work together and use each others' strengths to achieve their common goal. It also helps students interact and have more time to speak since they are in a smaller group setting rather than crowded classroom of 30. Using small groups, however, means utilizing both individual and group assessment plans to make sure all students are working together successfully and productively.

As with any teaching strategy, it is up to the teacher to make it his/her own. Mrs. Green is a veteran teacher who noticed positive changes in her classroom once she began integrating cooperative learning strategies. She generally arranges her desks into groupings within the classroom for quick and easy cooperative work. While cooperative learning will look different as each teacher and student puts his/her own ideas into it, the end result is undeniable: diverse groups of students working together successfully.

References:

- Gabler, I. C. & Schroeder, M. (2003). *Constructivist methods for the secondary classroom*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Holubec, E. J. (1998). *Cooperation in the classroom (rev. ed.)*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company.
- Putnam, J. W. (1993). *Cooperative learning and strategies for inclusion: Celebrating diversity in the classroom*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.

*Names changed to ensure privacy rights of minors are protected

Elements of Cooperative Groups

by Stacey Skoning

According to Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1988), there are five components of cooperative groups. It is these five elements that distinguish cooperative groups from other kinds of group work. These components have great benefits for children with disabilities.

The first of these components is *positive interdependence*. This requires students to work together to achieve a common goal. It

encourages students to interact with each other and work together.

The next is *individual accountability* which ensures that everyone does their fair share. Individual accountability can easily tie to curricular or IEP goals.

The third component is the necessity for *face-to-face interactions* and the fourth is a focus on *collaborative skills*. This focus on social skills offers students who need additional practice

more time to interact with their peers appropriately.

The final element of cooperative groups is that of *group processing*. This time is used for reflection on progress and setting new goals for the next cooperative group activity.

- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Holubec, E. J. (1998). *Cooperation in the classroom (rev. ed.)*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company.

IN Book Store

IN now has an on-line book store.

Recommended books on inclusion are available through our book store. Go to our web site at www.inclusion-news.org and click on the link.

Once on our bookstore page, you'll find a link to amazon.com. If you order ANYTHING through this link, a percentage of each sale will be sent to IN to help support the continued publication of our newsletter.

Happy shopping!

Parent-Educator Connection through the Mississippi Bend AEA

Sponsored by the Iowa Department of Education, this group provides parents and educators with opportunities to work together in positive ways to improve educational programs for children/youth with special needs. They offer support, connections to services and resources, workshops and presentations, books and other print materials, connect families with similar needs and interests, provide Parent Information Packets, and more. For more information contact the following Parent-Educator Facilitators:

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they are always that one student that needs help."

Last, cooperative groups can help teach life skills to the entire class. Meyers is constantly talking to her students about how they need to learn the skill of working with "non-friends." She tells the students, "What do you think would happen if I went to our principal and said, "Mr. Budde, I don't want my classroom across from Mr.



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Upcoming Issues of IN

Future issues of IN will address the following topics:

- The role of instructional assistants (paraprofessionals)
- Writing inclusive IEPs
- Transition services

Our readers are always welcome to submit articles. Articles may be submitted electronically to Stacey Skoning, editor. All submissions will be reviewed for possible publication. Please send them to staceyskoning@augustana.edu.

McCormick's room. I don't like him!" The students reply with, "He would tell you to go back to your classroom." Meyers then states, "Exactly!" She then tells students that as an adult you will have to work with people who you would not choose to be your friend. They are practicing this "skill" in her classroom by not getting to work with their friends all the time. She tells them that they do not need to become "best friends" but they do need to "get the job done efficiently and together."

Learning by Example

by Ashley Faulstich

Lynn Meyers, a teacher at Frank L. Smart Intermediate in Davenport, IA, is a true believer that, "Two heads are better than one." During our interview she shared with me what she has learned about the use of cooperative learning groups based on her 14 years of teaching both in a special education classroom and in a regular inclusive math and science classroom.

Meyers has faith in the idea that all students learn best when they are able to talk about content with their peers. This type of classroom organization gives the students an opportunity to share ideas and opinions and help each other if one student is lost or confused. As a teacher, you cannot constantly support all students at the same time.

Meyers also stated that even as a teacher, she works best when given

the opportunity to talk with other teachers to get ideas, ask questions, and get additional opinions. She meets weekly with other members of the Smart staff to talk about school related topics in a cooperative group setting.

Meyers also believes that cooperative learning groups foster positive peer pressure that can dramatically change students' attitudes and actions.

She states that there are two types of students that don't finish assignments: Those students that **can't** do the assignment and those students that **won't** work on the assignment. Meyers has seen in her 14 years of teaching that the students that "won't" work will be successful if they are placed with the right people in a cooperative learning group. Shy students or students that don't fit in also greatly

benefit from cooperative learning groups. Meyers has seen in her classroom that if shy students or students that don't feel like they fit in are given the opportunity to work with the right type of students in a cooperative group they can work on their social skills and become part of the school community.

Cooperative learning groups also work well for students with disabilities. Many times in these groups these students are helped as well as helping other students that do not have any disabilities. In a small group setting, these students can shine. If the student with a disability helps another student, their self-esteem dramatically increases. Lynn Meyers has seen this in her classroom. She stated, "It is such a nice change for these students to help others, instead of feeling like

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