

# QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

## *About Cooperative Learning*

In talking with parents and teachers about cooperative learning, I have heard a sampling of questions over the years. Here are a few of those questions with some answers, although I would be the first to recognize that there is more than one right answer to each of them.

### **What is cooperative learning?**

In cooperative learning, students achieve a goal through working together. Teachers design the lesson so that every group member is needed to complete a task. Students understand that they have succeeded only when everyone has learned the material. In other words, students work together to maximize their own and one another's learning. In addition, by using cooperative strategies students not only learn the material or task better, they also learn to work together. Social skills like encouraging, checking for understanding, seeking information and opinions, responding to ideas and disagreeing respectfully are consciously planned into the lesson. Students are given the opportunity to evaluate how well they completed the task, and whether they used good social skills. This encourages better learning and team spirit.

### **Cooperative learning really doesn't teach kids to live in a competitive world, does it?**

In the truest sense, I believe it does. In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey lists one of those habits as the ability to live the principle of Win/Win or No Deal. Or in other words, as we work or play with others, both parties should benefit. Our students can become skilled in negotiating so that everyone comes out a winner.

The question disregards the fact that our world is highly interdependent. Each of us must work with others every day. Our interactions and relationships more often require cooperation, rather than competition. If we are going to prepare our students for the "real world," then teaching them how to cooperate is important.

Furthermore, a study of *The Desire of Ages* suggests that we need to be teaching our children *how not to compete* in a competitive world, rather than teaching them *how to compete*.

### **We don't want our child to be held back by other kids in his group who are slower than he is. Why should he be responsible for other kids' work, too?**

When high-achieving students are placed in cooperative pairs or teams, they do as well or better than when they work in a traditional classroom setting. Gifted students benefit as much as anyone when they have to explain or clarify a concept to another person. Rather than being "held back," the fast learner will develop a more solid basis for his or her learning.

Also, having an opportunity to work with classmates helps gifted students create and cement friendships, an area that is often a weakness for the fast learner.

Students should not necessarily be responsible for the work of their group members. When cooperative learning works correctly, each student feels individually accountable. At the same time, each group member feels a responsibility to help others, too.

### **Won't implementing cooperative learning create a lot of classroom management problems?**

A teacher who has good classroom management before implementing cooperative learning will have good classroom management afterward. Of course, the flip side is true, too. Bad management before equals bad management after. In other words, if a teacher is struggling with classroom control, introducing cooperative learning will not solve the problem. On the other hand, if management is not an issue, introducing cooperative learning will enable the teacher to achieve even better classroom atmosphere and instruction. In the new learning community, both academic and behavioral issues will be handled by teachers and students working together.

### **My child's teacher has such a fervor for cooperative learning that I am afraid it will replace everything else.**

Keep in mind that even though cooperative learning has settled into the mainstream of teaching and learning practices, and thousands of teachers have received cooperative learning training, this technique is being consistently used in fewer than 5 percent of American classrooms.

The real question is, How much time

should cooperative learning take during an average school day? This is entirely up to the beliefs, skills, and commitment of the teacher. Cooperative learning should be used only to the extent that the teacher feels comfortable with it. Some teachers have internalized the principles of cooperation and have a tough time not using it. But even in their classrooms, there is a significant amount of individual learning, and even some playful competitive structures.

A teacher who is just starting to include cooperative learning in his or her lesson design should start small. As his or her comfort level increases, along with the comfort level of the students, the number of cooperative opportunities can increase, too. Parents should be reassured that cooperative learning will be one learning tactic among many. Students should learn how to work with others, but it is important for them to learn to work alone, too.

### **Isn't cooperative learning a form of communism?**

I think people are really asking: Isn't cooperative learning meant to equalize everyone? The answer is "No." Students still need to demonstrate their knowledge or skills as individuals. Those who know how to do something well, or understand a subject area well, will still need to show what they can do. The difference in a cooperative classroom is that students are allowed and encouraged to help one another. And as the year progresses, each student has opportunities to be both helper and helpee. Greg may not be good at editing for spelling errors, but he may be great at showing a classmate how to "bump" a volleyball; Ellen may be stumped in World History, but quite skilled in showing a partner how to solve an Algebra II problem. Cooperative learning can tap into students' strengths, which is much better than trying to make everyone the same.

### **Won't some group members work hard, while others don't do anything at all?**

If some group members are getting a "free ride," it isn't cooperative learning. When a cooperative learning lesson is designed correctly, all group members must participate and contribute in order for the group to be successful.

Many different cooperative learning structures and strategies can help ensure account-

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ability. Teachers may assign roles to each group member, randomly check on students or call on them to share, or test each student individually at the end of the chapter or unit. Rather than allowing some students to slip through the cracks, cooperative learning seeks to have everyone engaged in and feeling responsible for the learning.

### **What do you do with the child who doesn't want to learn from peers or work in a group setting?**

There are as many answers to this question as there are causes, but I think Mary Owens' answer applies to a large number of students (Mary teaches with me at Livingstone Junior Academy). "I had a sixth-grade student who immediately refused to work with anyone on any project, period! My first response was, 'Well, Jason, [not his real name] that's what we're doing now and I'm sure you'll feel differently after you get started.' But he didn't. The situation deteriorated, no matter what I suggested. My instincts told me eventually that this student needed space. I took him aside, and as we talked I realized that Jason had deeper needs than I had at first observed. Watching his facial expressions told me he not only wanted to work alone, he needed to work alone. That day after school, I spent some time thinking about Jason and what was going on inside of him. Jason, an only child, was used to being alone. He had almost any material thing his heart desired, and was used to getting immediate attention from adults instead of sparring with siblings for everything he wanted. Many times during my year with him, Jason asked to work alone and I always let him. I also urged him to extend himself more to his peers. By the end of the year, Jason had made progress. He was often able to be a productive team member. I was glad I had not forced him to conform to my image of the perfect cooperative team member. He grew because he had space to observe and then step out as he felt ready to do so."

### **Do teachers need formal cooperative learning training? It's not that hard to put kids in groups and get started, is it?**

The answer to all these questions is "Yes." Even teachers with a gift for student-centered teaching must get formal training. There are

many opportunities to attend a workshop or seminar on cooperative learning. These occur throughout the year, but are especially numerous during the summer months. Two well-known presenters are David and Roger Johnson, from the University of Minnesota. They have been teaching and researching for many years and have a common-sense approach that makes the technique easy to understand and implement. While hearing them in person would be great, if this isn't available, one can probably receive training from one of their "trainees." Many very good teachers and presenters have been taught by the Johnsons.

Another well-known presenter is Spencer Kagan, of the Kagan Cooperative Learning Company. Kagan is known for his focus on useful structures that can be brought into the classroom right away. Both the Johnsons and Kagan hold beginning through advanced workshops, and train trainers. A beginning or foundation course usually lasts four or five days. Shorter workshops are really only an orientation course, even if they are advertised differently. Most of our SDA colleges offer cooperative learning courses, and include cooperative learning in their summer course offerings for teachers seeking an educational "recharging," M.A. degrees, and credential renewal. A growing number of Adventist educators can now provide workshops from a uniquely Christian perspective, which is important.

### **Some teachers with training in cooperative learning don't seem to use it that much in their classrooms.**

Chances are, that is true. While many teachers are receiving training, far fewer are using it on a regular basis. I believe there are two reasons for this. The first has to do with the complexity of the approach. It is simple in concept, but difficult to implement. It is very different from how most of us were taught and goes against what schools have done for a long time. It bucks a competitive society and raises student and parental questions. Teaching cooperatively takes longer to plan for and to put into practice. In other words, our 30- to 40-minute class periods will not be long enough to have our students working through problems or issues as a group.

The second reason has to do with how conference and local school leadership view

school reform and professional growth. They may send a teacher to a workshop or provide a summer convention orientation, but there is often no follow-up support or implementation.

### **What can principals and superintendents do to foster school reform and cooperative learning?**

Principals can send teams of teachers to workshops, rather than just individuals. And just as important, they should attend those workshops with their teachers. This will create a nucleus for change. Together, principals and teachers can provide peer support and evaluation, and model or practice teach with a colleague present. Principals should be the "keepers of the vision." If a principal believes that student-centered instruction is more effective, then he or she will keep that goal tactfully and compassionately in everyone else's mind, including his own.

Superintendents can begin to rethink their professional growth budgets. Rather than putting fantastic sums of money into conventions with their accompanying "dog and pony shows" just before the start of school (when it's too late to use any of the ideas anyway), they should sponsor a few teachers who can become regionally recognized experts in that field. It might seem expensive initially, but the savings over time would be significant. For instance, a teacher who has expressed an interest in cooperative learning and shown an ability to work with students in a cooperative setting could be sent to receive the training necessary to become a trainer in cooperative learning. Instead of paying an outside expert \$600 to \$1,000 a day to instruct our teachers, the conference would now have a resident expert. And while the \$1,000-a-day person will be far away tomorrow, the resident teacher can be available for ongoing support and instruction.

If the conference had resident experts in several educational reform areas, these people could be available to other school districts, public or private, for a fee. This would help offset their initial training expenses.

Superintendents need to understand that promoting a one-time workshop or seminar does not bring about change or improvement.

Change takes ongoing support that has been planned and funded. — Jim Roy. ☞