

# Cooperative Learning and Prejudice Reduction

Brenda Dorn Conard

I believe that cooperative learning can help reduce prejudice. A supportive statement for this position is offered by Nancy Schniedewind and Ellen Davidson in *Cooperative Learning, Cooperative Lives: A Sourcebook of Learning Activities for Building a Peaceful World*:

Cooperation is important not only for schools, but for society as well. If we are to survive as human beings and transform a world of inequality, international conflict, and potential nuclear disaster, young people must develop cooperative skills and values more fully than their elders have. Since we live in an increasingly interdependent society, we must teach collaboration. For with it comes the possibility of survival, justice and peace.<sup>1</sup>

Last December, I attended an Anti-Defamation League Midwest Conference in Chicago, "American Citizenship in the 21st Century: Education for a Pluralistic, Democratic America." Participants and conference leaders alike wrestled with the issues of what new thinking and strategies educators need to meet the challenges of the coming years. We know a great deal about who our students will be and where they will be located. We know that one in three will be nonwhite and that many will be poor. How can we insure that they will succeed in our schools? How can we insure that they will not be victims of prejudice and discriminatory actions? How can we insure that *all* students will become good citizens, who are

(1) competent at acquiring and using information

(2) able to promote their own or various group interests while participating in civic and other social activities

(3) able to make judgments and decisions

(4) able to communicate and cooperate with others

The Ohio State Department of Education recently (1985) published *Citizenship, Multicultural and Human Relations Education*<sup>2</sup> which cited the qualities listed above as the purpose of citizenship education. This treatise presents the message that a definite purpose of schooling is to help mold good citizens. What good citizens are is, of course, a question. Though not characterized by the old, narrow stereotype of the patriotic love-it-or-leave-it American, they are patriotic. Good citizens are multiculturally astute; they have human relations skills that enable them to interact with a multicultural population, and they have a global perspective. They are citizens of the world. They can collaborate with others and look at issues from a variety of perspectives. They cannot be encumbered with prejudicial attitudes that limit their thinking. Few would disagree that such citizens are desirable, but how do we help students become good citizens? What must they learn and how must they learn it?

In looking for answers to those questions, I discovered the philosophy, rationale, and research of the Cooperative Learning Movement. Some answers are in the cooperative learning literature and within the experiences of those of us involved with cooperative learning. When we encourage students to help each other learn and to value helping and cooperating, there is less prejudice than before. Students learn to respect each other as they work together to accomplish common goals. They are better citizens as a result.

I view cooperative learning from the perspective of an educational philosopher and a multicultural education consultant. Many years ago, while

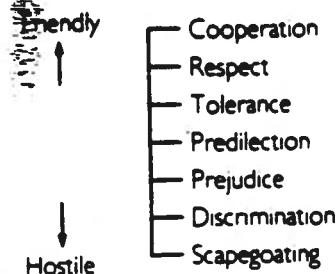
wrestling with concerns for the best possible education for all students, I wrote a Master's thesis entitled "The Existential Dimension of Character Education."<sup>3</sup> I tried to determine what kind of persons society wants and needs formal public school education to produce. Though I thought a great deal about affective education, one thought never occurred to me until a few years ago. We do not succeed in helping to develop positive character in our students because our learning structures yield only one or a few winners and many losers. I had for years advocated conducting activities that help students enhance their self-esteem, but I had never stopped to realize that our grading system (the way we hand out learning rewards and ask students to be better than someone else as proof of their learning) insures that many students in every class will have low self-esteem.

When we structure learning as if it were a competitive sport, i.e., first done, best paper, prettiest picture, neatest writing, we teach students not to value cooperation, but to value winning at all costs. I'm afraid we also teach them to value studenting or playing the school game more than learning. We may even teach some students not to try.

Learning has been predicated upon the mistaken principle that to help a fellow student is cheating and that it is somehow wrong to share learning with another. Yet, if I give you an idea and you give me one, we have two ideas.

Probably no one has looked at the attitudes of prejudice more closely than the late Gordon W. Allport. His pamphlet, *The ABC's of Scapegoating*,<sup>4</sup> pictured social relationships on a continuum (see Figure) with cooperation the friendliest behavior and scapegoat-

Figure

A Continuum of Social Relationships  
Among Human Groups

ing the most hostile. If we accept that scapegoating is behavior that results from negative prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory actions, then we should look to the other end of the continuum and discover how to foster cooperation and prevent what is negative from prevailing.

What can happen if we focus on Allport's positive end on the continuum? Can we begin to eliminate some prejudice? Some research results are illuminating.

Spencer Kagan's research at the University of California at Riverside shows that approximately 85 percent of the college undergraduate students he surveyed indicate that they have never worked cooperatively to learn, despite the fact that cooperation is typically listed as a goal of citizenship education. How can we, on the one hand, declare that cooperation is an important and necessary skill for becoming a good citizen, but on the other hand, almost never allow students an opportunity to practice that skill? Even employers in business and industry agree about the importance of cooperation. Employees are more often fired because of inability to get along with customers or fellow workers than for inability to discharge the other responsibilities of their position.

John Goodlad in *A Study of Schooling* discusses reasons we do not use cooperative learning strategies extensively in our schools:

Teachers appear to teach within a very limited repertoire of pedagogical alternatives emphasizing their own talk and the monitoring of seatwork—

the prevailing instructional group is the total class: small-group activity is rare—classroom contingencies encourage and support minimal movement, minimal student-to-student or student-to-teacher interaction, and low non-intimate affect.<sup>5</sup>

If we are to improve our teaching processes, then we "must promote a classroom ethos in which students are responsible not only for their own learning but also for that of their classmates."<sup>6</sup>

We must stop teaching in the way that we were taught and begin to look for methods of instruction that will yield the outcomes we want—that is, students who

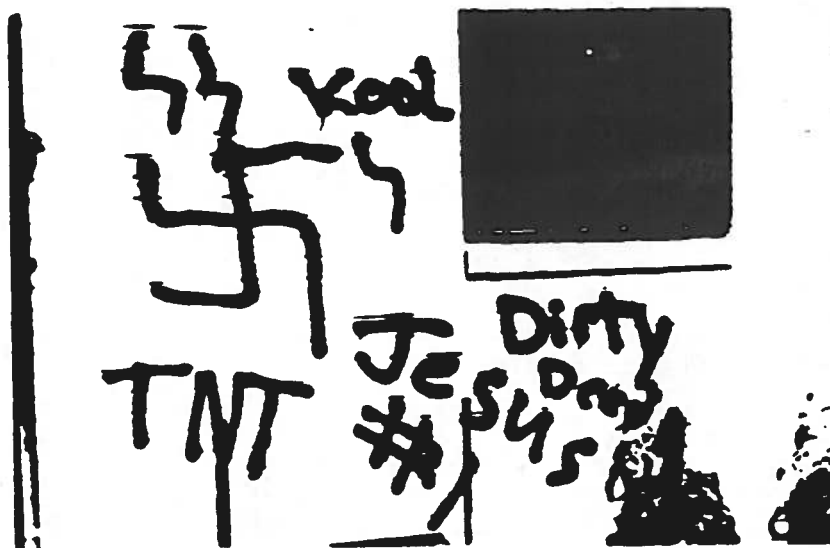
- are knowledgeable in many contexts and who value knowledge
- are capable of high-level thinking and see learning as a lifelong process
- are good decision makers
- are confident and psychologically healthy
- have multicultural knowledge and understanding
- have human relation skills for interacting with people different from themselves
- can view issues from many perspectives
- think globally

Many of these specific learner outcomes have been the basis for research by such cooperative learning

advocates as Robert Slavin,<sup>7</sup> David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson,<sup>8</sup> and Shlomo Sharan.<sup>9</sup> Researchers have found that students in a cooperative learning environment have more positive race relations, greater self-esteem, greater concern for others, more positive attitudes toward school and teachers, higher levels of reasoning, increased perspective taking, more on-task behavior, and higher achievement than other learning environments yield. The research is extensive and positive.

William Glasser, who has presented his understanding of psychiatry and psychology in such books as *Schools without Failure*<sup>10</sup> and *Control Theory in the Classroom*,<sup>11</sup> believes that all humans are motivated to satisfy the need for love, power, freedom, and fun. He maintains that many schools are institutions that deny students a chance to satisfy those needs. He feels that cooperative learning is a learning structure that provides students opportunities to experience love, power, freedom, and fun. Students satisfy those needs when they are able to interact with other students and to determine how their learning group can best accomplish a task.

A cooperative learning team is different from a group that merely works together, for there must be both individual and group accountability and



**"To me, the question of doing away with all race and religious bigotry in this country is the most important of all."**

*Theodore Roosevelt*



1858

THEODORE ROOSEVELT CENTENNIAL 1958

there must be a "cooperative incentive structure and a cooperative task structure"<sup>12</sup> for positive results to occur. Paraphrasing Morton Deutsch, Roger Johnson and David Johnson state that "a cooperative interaction pattern is one in which the goals of separate individuals are linked together so that there is a positive correlation among their goal attainments." A sink- or swim-together attitude develops. The Johnsons also found that

cooperative learning experiences promote greater acceptance of differences and interpersonal attraction among students from different ethnic backgrounds and among handicapped and nonhandicapped students. Putting students in cooperative contact who might not ordinarily seek such interactions and having them work cooperatively moves students beyond initial prejudices toward other students to multidimensional views of one another. Furthermore, such experiences allow them to deal with each other as fellow students rather than as stereotypes.<sup>13</sup>

According to Alfie Kohn (1986):

Simply bringing together children from different backgrounds does not produce harmony, as a chorus of bitter voices never tires of pointing out. But instead of simply indicting desegregation (or, worse, abandoning it), it seems more sensible to investigate what happens to students once they are in the same classroom. Whereas competition creates an

atmosphere of hostility and does nothing to overcome differences, cooperation builds bridges.<sup>14</sup>

Not all competitors will be lifelong enemies, just as not all cooperators will develop enduring friendships. But a predisposition toward hostility or attraction undeniably develops as a result of the structure under which we deal with one another. That is what the evidence and, if we think about it, our own experience demonstrate.<sup>15</sup>

Teachers using a cooperative learning structure form teams of students into heterogeneous learning groups. After presenting the content, rather than challenging students as individuals to learn, retain, or use the information given, they give the learning team a charge. The challenge is to learn the material and to help teammates and other classmates learn it. The verbal and nonverbal messages should be that the teacher values students' helping one another.

If cooperative teams are used only for peer practice purposes, there are social benefits beyond the heightened achievement. On the other hand, when the cooperative team participates in projects requiring students to set their own agenda, manage their own time, make choices about topics, division of labor, and a variety of other matters, tremendous positive results occur. Structured cooperative models that allow for this latitude are jigsaw methods developed by Elliot Aronson<sup>16</sup> and

Robert Slavin<sup>17</sup>, Co-Op, Co-Op methods developed by Spencer Kagan<sup>18</sup> and the group investigation method developed by Shlomo Sharan.<sup>19</sup>

The effectiveness of a cooperative learning project is illustrated in the following example where the tasks required helped students internalize not only the need for cooperation as a process but also as a prerequisite to solving conflicts and problems. For 10 weeks, 5th graders investigated the theme of peacemaking. They began the unit with self-image-building activities and then started to look at conflict as part of life. Students learned that no one escapes conflict, though there are many ways to deal with it. Through role rehearsal and small group discussion, students learned what consequences are part of different kinds of conflict resolutions. Violent responses often escalate conflict rather than manage it. Students practiced looking at conflicts for a possible win-win response.

Early sessions devoted to students' personal conflicts soon turned to discussions about rights. Student teams brainstormed what these rights should be for all people and they came up with a facsimile of the UN's Rights of the Child. The question was posed "Do all children of the world receive their rights?"

After agreeing on universal rights, the next phase was to look for situations in which rights were denied. Examples included the Holocaust, slavery, Indian resettlement, Japanese American resettlement during World War II, and the denial of civil rights to many minority groups throughout our history. Students began to see that, besides the personal conflicts they experience, there are conflicts between groups and nations. Our look at global conflict started with viewing slides of starving children around the world. The pictures incensed the students.

Helping students understand some of the reasons for world hunger was our next step. We used the following simulation:

### Global Food Consumption Simulation

Divide class into the five continents based on these percentages.\*

	Population	Food Supply
Africa.....	10%.....	10%
Asia.....	59%.....	5%
Europe.....	17%.....	25%
Latin America.....	8%.....	15%
North America.....	6%.....	45%

\*Numbers based on the Report of World Military and Social Expenditures.—Ruth Leger Sivard

Using cookies as our food supply, we found the 17 students who represented Asia were furious when they were expected to share just two cookies, while the two students representing North America had 14 cookies. We heard various solutions from bombing to sharing the cookies. The day ended with students' sharing cookies under UN rules.

To realize how complex solutions to global problems are, students did simulations on giving good foreign aid.<sup>20</sup> Teams became different countries with special problems and needs. They were asked to spend x million aid dollars. They had a catalog and price list of everything from irrigation systems to textbooks. Each group established a goal of self-sufficiency for its country. Students also learned that Americans have been generous givers to others in the world. They saw that we have abundance, but no ugly American picture was drawn.

As a culmination, students started envisioning a peaceful tomorrow and what that implies for them and for their behavior.

Students in that class practiced not only cooperation to complete specific assignments but they discovered the need among peoples of the world to cooperate for peaceful conflict resolution. They examined their prejudices toward other nationalities and groups. As they looked at prejudice as part of a peacemaking unit, they seemed to become peaceful and cooperative. When four students—a black male, a female Laotian refugee, a white Appalachian female, and a white male—worked together on how to help their homeland (Ethiopia in the simulation)

by spending their foreign aid wisely, all prejudices between them dissolved. They had an important task to accomplish. They felt power to make decisions, freedom to tackle the problem as they felt best, fun at having a chance to talk and interact, and (I hope) some love as their ideas and opinions were respected.

As teachers, we can help students reduce their prejudices by allowing them to learn cooperatively and encouraging them to value each other. Research supports the claim that cooperative learning reduces prejudice. Practicing cooperation is conducive to cooperation—the polar opposite of prejudice.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Schiedewind and Ellen Davidson, *Cooperative Learning: Cooperative Lives: A Sourcebook of Learning Activities for Building a Peaceful World* (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown Company, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Ohio Department of Education, Writing Team Chair, Frank Schiraldi, *Citizenship, Multicultural and Human Relations Education: Minimum Standards Leadership Series*, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Brenda Conard Carrera, "The Existential Dimension of Character Education," Master's Thesis. The Ohio State University, College of Education, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Allport, Gordon W. *ABC's of Scapegoating*, 7th rev. ed. (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> John L. Goodlad, "A Study of Schooling: Some Implications for School Improvement," *Kappan* (April 1983): 552-58.

<sup>6</sup> Goodlad, 558.

<sup>7</sup> Slavin, Robert E. "Cooperative Learning," *Review of Educational Research*, 1980.

<sup>8</sup> David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, *Learning Together and Alone: Cooperation, Competition, and Individualization* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975).

<sup>9</sup> Shlomo Sharan, "Cooperative Learning in Small Groups: Recent Methods and Effects on Achievement, Attitudes, and Ethnic Relations," *Review of Educational Research* 50: 24-71.

<sup>10</sup> William Glasser, *Schools without Failure* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

<sup>11</sup> William Glasser, *Control Theory in the Classroom* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Slavin, *Students Motivating Students to Excel: Cooperative Incentives, Cooperative Tests and Student Achievement*, *Elementary School Journal* 85, no. 1 (1984): 55.

<sup>13</sup> Roger T. Johnson and David W. Johnson, "Student-Student Interaction: Ignored but Powerful," *Journal of Teacher Education*, July-August 1985: 23.

<sup>14</sup> Albie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case against Competition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 150.

<sup>15</sup> Kohn, 151.

<sup>16</sup> Elliot Aronson, *Jigsaw Classroom* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1987).

<sup>17</sup> Robert E. Slavin, *Using Student Team Learning* (Baltimore: Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Spencer Kagan, *Cooperative Learning Resources for Teachers* (Riverside: University of California, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> Shlomo Sharan, Paul Hare, Clark D. Webb, and Rachel Hertz-Lazarowitz, *Cooperation in Education* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> Steven L. Lamy et al., *Comparative World Issues for Grades 1-12* (Denver: Center for Teaching International Relations (CTIR) University of Denver, 1980).

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