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BUILDING A CARING, COOPERATIVE CLASSROOM

“**A** cooperative classroom? Students who respect and care for each other? My students only know how to put each other down.”

“Teach students how to cooperate? Are you kidding? I don’t have time to do everything else as it is. I’ve got test scores to raise.”

“Social skills? Aren’t they the job of the parents?”

“Come on now. You have to be kidding. What else do you want to add to the curriculum. Isn’t it already an overstuffed sausage?”

“Isn’t the school responsible for too much already? Why should we have to teach the social skills too?”

“These are just little children. Isn’t this premature?”

Such are the legitimate questions that arise whenever the topic of building a caring, cooperative classroom erupts in the faculty lounge. Each deserves a thoughtful response.

Why build a caring, cooperative classroom? Why teach students how to cooperate? There are several valid answers. Each answer may not fit every school. But all describe contributing reasons. In our day and age, each reason merits consideration.

1. **The dissolution of the “traditional” family.** Sociologists have documented the increasing numbers of children who come from single-parent, mixed-parent, dual working-parent, and no-parent homes. We can now add the homeless child as well. They tell us that in today’s world, these family structures are the norm, not the rare exception. These same sociologists have shown us the effects that the different family structures may have on student achievement and behavior in school. Most experienced teachers can corroborate those effects. And most parents, especially those who must raise children as the sole parent or as dual working parents, know the special challenges and unique child-rearing problems they experience. Probably nothing is more difficult than the lack of time these parents have for their youngsters. The time to support, assist, correct, model positive values, communicate expected behavior, and encourage social skills is often not there, not because the parents are bad, but because they are struggling to earn the dollars to keep the family fed and clothed. Add the decreased time and energy for proper supervision and the result is more students arriving at the schoolhouse door without the basic social skills in place.

2. **TV models.** The change in family structure can account for only a small portion of the rationale for teaching social skills in the schoolhouse. However, when we combine the enormous number of hours that young people sit in front of the TV each week with the decrease of adult supervision, support, and direction, we can see readily why the electronic babysitter has such a negative influence on young minds. The TV, with its aptitude for modeling the most anti-social, anti-caring behaviors, has filled a void in the character formation of today’s youth.

If the child wants to learn how adults learn to laugh, he or she needs only to copy the art of the put-down in today’s situation comedies and cartoon shows. If the child wants to learn how adults solve problems, he or she needs only to watch the horror movies and the detective shows to master the arts of “shoot-em-down” or “beat-em-up.” Love and kindness? Cooperation? Just review the soaps. Mutual support or caring? Try “family” shows such as the Simpsons. Given the average student’s average ingestion of TV it is a wonder that any positive behavior occurs on the playground or in the classroom.

3. **Unclear value focus in the school.** In pursuit of our nation’s desire to provide equal educational opportunity for all who come to the schoolhouse door, the desire to be free of religious influence inside the schoolhouse has caused our public schools to adopt a value-empty philosophy. This in turn has left most public schools without any focus on what is most important for students to learn. As so

many studies on school excellence have argued, a school without a focus is like a ship without a rudder. In place of the positive value focus, an “every man for himself” philosophy is dominant. In such an environment, young people become confused and unclear. In this state, they learn little about social responsibility, mutual caring, respect, or cooperation.

These three factors have contributed greatly to the increased number of students who have little idea about how to behave in a social organization, other than what they have learned from the negative social models that saturate their lives. As the number of these students increases, the amount of attention that a teacher can give to the academic work in school diminishes. More time is spent on correcting negative behavior, stopping for interruptions, and managing conflicts.

If the American school is going to adhere to the ideal that every child be educated to the fullest of his or her potential, the problems and challenges created by the changing world in which both students and schools exist must be addressed. The school, and more specifically, the classroom teacher, can only do so much. Given this unique challenge and given the limited resources and the increasing pressures on education, the teacher and the school must start with what they can most control: instructional time and proven methods that address the problems which most regularly block quality instruction time.

The methods for teaching cooperative social skills have not only proven their worth (Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Cohen et al., 1990), but also provided a framework for intensifying academic achievement, fostering higher-order thinking, and extending learning into new dimensions for all learners (Joyce, Showers, and Rolheiser-Bennett, 1987).

What all this says to us is that in spite of the changes in children that teachers see each day, the tools do exist to counteract the problems and to move students to the high levels of learning that teachers have always desired. The task of moving students to higher levels of learning will require that we re-order instructional priorities, restructure curriculum, and reschedule time.

The answer to “why social skills,” therefore, does not mean that a teacher has to cover less of his or her academic curriculum: it does mean that he or she will spend more time getting students ready for their academic work by taking some extra time in the beginning of the school year to change behaviors and attitudes. When the teacher takes the time at the start of the year to work on cooperative social skills, the students dig into the academic work more deeply with fewer interruptions and more time on task. Like the “little engine that could,” the teacher

puts a great deal more energy into getting the train to roll, but much less energy once the train is roaring down the tracks.

Those are the short-range and practical reasons for taking time to focus on cooperative social skills. The other, more long-range reasons have to do with the paradigm shift our society is experiencing with more intensity each year. That shift has the world moving from a highly individualistic “me-first” social structure to a “we-sink-or-swim-together” structure.

We see the shift all around us. For instance, we see how most major corporations weave teamwork, quality circles, vertical decision teams, and other “we” approaches to participatory management into the fabric of their organizations. In several of the top MBA programs, students are assigned team projects, work for team grades, and are evaluated for their team contributions. The international economy requires business transactions with people of very diverse cultures. Success in the shrinking global economy depends very much on finely tuned people skills.

How can a teacher build a caring, cooperative classroom?

Creating a caring, cooperative classroom is a major teaching challenge. First, the attitudes promoted in the cooperative classroom run counter to the put-down, competitive culture of most schools and most communities. Second, attitudes and beliefs don’t change easily. Many students are deeply mired in negative, non-cooperative behaviors learned from TV, the street, and their peer culture. Third, the effort and time needed to produce the change is hard to find in the already full teaching day. But, it can be done! As Alfie Kohn (1991), Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton (1991), and other authors point out there are a host of exemplary classroom models in which caring and cooperation are the rule. James Comer’s work, IRI’s Project Extend, and classrooms in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and California show that it is possible for even the most difficult and at-risk students to learn cooperative behaviors and develop caring attitudes.

In this book, we use the “best practices” developed in Project Extend by a team of cooperative learning consultants and in the classrooms of Lawton, Oklahoma. Project Extend, funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s “Follow Through” Program, worked three years in five school districts in northern Illinois. In that time, teachers and principals learned how to use cooperative learning as the critical instructional tool. Special emphasis was placed on teaching the K-3 students how to work cooperatively, how to care about classmates, and how to respect themselves, their teachers, and their parents. Parents also learned to work with the cooperative framework and to reinforce the “we take care of each other” attitudes.

This book presents a curriculum of social skills, a teaching methodology, and specific lessons drawn from the experience of the classroom teachers. When we have taught these strategies to other teachers, they have reported similar results to our Follow Through project: (1) emphasis on the social skill model that asks students, even very young ones, to practice, self evaluate, and refine, changed teaching methods from passive to active learning; (2) active learning in the lessons helped students find new ways to interact with each other, build team spirit and caring for each other; and (3) parents reported positive changes in their children's behavior and attitudes at home.

When is it best to start social skill development?

A well-conceived early childhood program ought to be saturated with social skill instruction and opportunity for the young students to practice as they play together. Unfortunately, all such programs are not so well conceived. In some programs, more and more academic content is forced at earlier and earlier ages to such a degree that this rich opportunity for social skill formation is eliminated. In others, the students play randomly, sometimes alone and sometimes together. The ideal program, even at the pre-school stage, would provide some modeling, guided practice, and constructive feedback in cooperative social skills, along with language development and fun activities that make learning an active engagement for all students.

This social skill instruction cannot end with graduation into the primary grades. If anything, the primary grades can be the best opportunity for young students to develop fully the foundation of social skills which will ensure academic success and positive self-esteem in the later years. And, as the students move into the middle grades where peer pressure is so strong, the encouragement and support *must* continue.

Some upper grade people will argue that today's students didn't have this foundation. Thus, they say, it is a waste of time to start now. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although it may be more difficult to introduce students already formed with negative social skills to the values of cooperation, trust, and respect, it is never too late. In fact, it is probably all the more important to take the extra time and introduce the social skills even in the 12th grade if that is what the students most need.

What is the best way to teach social skills?

Social skill instruction works best in a direct instruction transfer model. This model, as we have used it here in this book, calls for six key ingredients in its recipe for success.
