

## Teaching Cooperative Learning with Children's Literature

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### Abstract

The focus of this article is cooperative learning as an approach that educators can use to increase children's enjoyment of literature and reinforce social skills of working together. Goal structures (competitive, individual, and cooperative) and the elements of cooperative learning are explained and defined based on the Johnson and Johnson model. A summary of research about both areas, cooperative learning and teaching children's literature, are presented. Examples of children's literature for primary, middle, high school level, as well as multiple resources to draw from are included. The literature selected focuses on the theme of working together. Cooperation, as all social skills, can be taught. Age appropriate resources, centered on the theme of cooperation, are emphasized as choices to promote and reinforce cooperative learning strategies.

*Keywords:* cooperative learning, children's literature, instruction, curriculum

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Cooperation, as all social skills, can be taught. Age appropriate resources, centered on the theme of cooperation, are emphasized as choices to promote and reinforce cooperative learning strategies. The focus of this article is cooperative learning as an approach that educators can use to increase children's enjoyment of literature. Goal structures and the elements of cooperative learning are explained and defined based on the Johnson and Johnson model.

### Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to present a summary of research about two areas: cooperative learning and teaching children's literature. Specific examples of children's literature and multiple resources to draw from are included and focus on the theme of working together.

### **Theoretical Framework and Perspectives**

The theoretical framework for this article centers on cooperative learning. Cooperative learning has its roots in the theories of social interdependence, cognitive development, and behavioral learning. Some research provides exceptionally strong evidence that cooperative learning results in greater effort to achieve, more positive relationships, and greater psychological health than competitive or individualistic learning efforts (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994).

Social interdependence theory views cooperation as resulting from positive links of individuals to accomplish a common goal. The Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka proposed in the early 1900's that although groups are dynamic wholes the interdependence among members is variable. Kurt Lewin (1948) stated that interdependence from common goals provides the essential essence of a group. This interdependence creates groups that are dynamic wholes.

Within cognitive development theory, cooperation must precede cognitive growth. Cognitive growth springs from the alignment of various perspectives as individuals work to attain common goals. Both Piaget and Vygotsky saw cooperative learning with more able peers and instructors as resulting in cognitive development and intellectual growth (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998).

The assumption of behavioral learning theory is that students will work hard on tasks that provide a reward and that students will fail to work on tasks that provide no reward or punishment. Cooperative learning is one approach that rewards individuals for participation in the group's effort.

The widespread use of cooperative learning is due to multiple factors. According to Johnson and Johnson (2002) three of the most important factors are that cooperative learning is clearly based on theory, validated by research, and operationalized into clear procedures educators can use.

There are over 900 research studies validating the effectiveness of cooperative learning over competitive and individualistic efforts. This body of research has considerable generalizability. For more than 110 years the research has been conducted by a wide range of researchers with markedly different orientations working in various settings and countries. The research participants have varied widely as to cultural background, economic class, age, and gender. Furthermore, a wide variety of research tasks and measures of the dependent variables have been used (Johnson and Johnson, 2002).

A review of the literature on cooperative learning shows that students benefit academically and socially from cooperative, small-group learning (Gillies, 2002). Cooperative learning can produce positive effects on student achievement (Cohen, 1986; Davidson, 1989; Devries & Slavin, 1978; Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Okebukola, 1985; Reid, 1992; Slavin, 1990). Academic benefits include higher attainments in reading comprehension (Mathes, Fuchs & Fuchs, 1997) and mathematics (Ross, 1995; Whicker, Nunnery, & Bol, 1997) and enhanced conceptual understanding and achievement in science (Lonning, 1993; Watson, 1991). Social benefits include more on-task behaviors and helping interactions with group members (Burron, James, & Ambrosio, 1993; Gillies & Ashman, 1998; McManus & Gettinger, 1996), higher self-esteem, more friends, more involvement in classroom activities, and improved attitudes toward learning (Lazarowitz, Baird, & Bolden, 1996; Lazarowitz, Hertz-Lazarowitz, & Baird, 1994).

According to Emmer and Gerwels (2002) some research on cooperative learning has addressed instructional components. In a number of studies students have been taught interaction skills, such as how to question or to help each other so that they did not give

answers but facilitated each other's thinking (Fuchs, Fuchs, Kazdan, & Allen, 1999; Gillies & Ashman, 1996, 1998; Nattiv, 1994; Webb, Troper, & Fall, 1995). And, when students are taught such skills, positive outcomes such as increased intrinsic motivation, liking for school, and self-esteem can result (Battistich, Solomon, & Delucchi, 1993).

### **Definitions**

Definitions of terms used in the Johnson and Johnson model are defined to promote understanding.

A *goal structure* specifies the type of interdependence among students as they strive to accomplish their learning goals.

*Interdependence* may be positive (cooperation), negative (competition), or none (individualistic efforts).

*Competition: I Swim, You Sink; I Sink You Swim*

If I obtain my goal, you cannot obtain your goal and vice versa: there is a negative correlation among goal attainments.

*Individualization: We Are Each In This Alone*

My achieving my goal is unrelated to your achieving your goal; there is no correlation among goal attainments.

*Cooperation: We Sink or Swim Together*

I can attain my goal only if you attain your goal: there is a positive correlation among goal attainments.

Many research studies provide exceptionally strong evidence that cooperative learning results in greater effort to achieve, more positive relationships, and greater psychological health than competitive or individualistic learning efforts (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994).

Teaching children's literature using cooperative learning enhances and promotes the understanding and enjoyment of the experience through the interaction with peers.

### **Elements of Cooperative Learning**

Johnson, D., Johnson, R. and Holubec, E. (1994) emphasize five elements characteristic of cooperative learning lessons. These are positive interdependence, face-to-face (promotive) interaction, individual accountability (personal responsibility), collaborative skills, and group processing.

**Positive Interdependence**

Students must feel that they need each other in order to complete the group's task, that they "sink or swim" together. Some ways to create this feeling are through establishing mutual goals, joint rewards, shared materials and information, and assigned roles.

**Face-to-Face Interaction**

Beneficial educational outcomes are due to the interaction patterns and verbal exchanges that take place among students in carefully structured cooperative learning groups. Oral summarizing, giving and receiving explanations, and elaborating are important types of verbal interchanges.

**Individual Accountability**

Each individual must learn the material and be able to demonstrate their mastery of the information. Group members help individual members learn the material.

**Collaborative Skills**

Students do not come to school with the social skills they need to collaborate effectively with others. Teachers need to teach the appropriate communication, leadership, trust, decision making, and conflict management skills to students and provide the motivation to use these skills in order for groups to function effectively.

**Group Processing**

Processing means giving students the time and procedures to analyze how well their groups are functioning. This helps all group members achieve while maintaining effective working relationships among members.

**Children's Literature**

According to Andrew Wright (1997), it is important for children to make stories as well as to receive and respond to stories from other people. Using these ideas, students will not view a text as an abstract, flat piece of printed matter isolated from and irrelevant to their lives (Maley, 1987). They will enjoy literature and it will become a part of their lives. Teachers learn how to help students to better understand the books they are reading and can use their creativity to create new stories.

Wood, Roser, and Martinez, (2001) compiled book lists by level around the theme of working together. This provides a resource that centers on quality children's literature and reinforces the importance of working together and can be structured into lessons using cooperative learning to experience working together. The book lists are presented in groupings of primary, primary and middle, middle and advanced, and advanced. Wood, Roser, and Martinez (2001) state that, "Through collaborative literacy, students are introduced to books that feature characters working together to achieve a goal, share their thinking through collaborative book discussions, and learn how to develop the need to get along and cooperate by examining how the book themes apply to their lives."

### Book Lists: Theme of Working Together

The following lists are adapted from Wood, K. D., Roser, N., and Martinez, M. (2001). Cooperative learning focuses on teaching students to work together and the lists center on the theme of working together. The match of content focus and research-based instructional strategies strengthens the message of the importance of social skills.

#### Primary

- The Adventures of Sugar and Junior* by Angela Sheif-Madearis. Holiday House, 1995.  
*Bein' With You This Way* by W. Nikola-Lisa. Lee & Low, 1994.  
*The Best Friends Club: A Lizzie and Harold Story* by Elizabeth Winthrop. Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1989.  
*Come a Tide* by George Ella Lyon. Orchard, 1990.  
*The Crayon Box that Talked* by Shane Derolf. Random House, 1997.  
*Dumpling Soup* by Jama Kim Rattigan. Little Brown, 1993.  
*Frog, Duck, and Rabbit* by Susanna Gretz. Four Winds Press, 1992.  
*Gooseberry Park* by Cynthia Rylant, Harcourt Brace, 1995.  
*Lizzie and Harold* by Elizabeth Winthrop. Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1986.  
*Swimmy* by Leo Lionni. Knopf, 1987.  
*This is the Way We Eat Our Lunch: A Book About Children Around the World* by Edith Baer. Scholastic, 1995.  
*Together* by George Ella Lyon. Orchard, 1989.  
*Yo! Yes?* by Chris Rasehka. Orchard, 1993.

#### Primary and Middle

- All in a Day* by Mitsumasa Anno. Philomel, 1986  
*Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Hood Story from China* by Ed Young. Philomel, 1989.  
*Smoky Night* by Eve Bunting. Harcourt, 1994.  
*The Wednesday Surprise* by Eve Bunting, Clarion, 1992.

#### Middle

- All the Colors of the Earth* by Sheila Hamanaka. Morrow, 1994.  
*Ben and Me* by Robert Lawson. Little, Brown, 1988.  
*The Blue and the Gray* by Eve Bunting. Harcourt, 1996.  
*Deadline! From News to Newspaper* by Gail Gibbons. Cromwell 1987.  
*Henry's Wrong Turn* by Harriet Ziefert, Little, Brown, 1989.  
*The Patchwork Quilt* by Valerie Flournoy. Dial, 1985.  
*Shh! We're Writing the Constitution* by Jean Fritz. Putman, 1987.  
*The Streets are Free* by Kurusa. Annick Press, 1985.

**Middle and Advanced**

- Dave at Night* by Gail Carson Levine. Harper, 1999.  
*Francie* by Karen English. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1999.  
*Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbriek. Scholastic, 1998.  
*The Great Turkey Walk* by Kathleen Karr. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1998.  
*Last Summer with Maizon* by Jacqueline Woodson. Delacorte, 1990.  
*Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry. Bantam, Doubleday, Dell, 1989.  
*Pink and Say* by Patriciaa Polacco. Philomel, 1994.  
*The Shakespeare Stealer* by Gary Blackwood. Dutton, 1998.

**Advanced**

- Anne Frank Remembered* by Miep Gies. Simon & Schuster, 1987.  
*Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank. Washington Square Press, 1985.  
*The Cay* by Thodore Taylor. Doubleday, 1987.  
*Dacey's Song* by Cynthia Voigt. Atheneum, 1982.  
*Julie of the Wolves* by Jean Craighead George. Harper & Row, 1972.  
*The Moves Make the Man* by Bruce Brooks. Harper Collins, 1984.  
*This Same Sky: A Collection of Poems from Around the World* by Naomi Shihab Nye. Simon & Schuster, 1992.  
*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Warner Books, 1960.  
*Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues* by Harriette Gillem Robinet. Atheneum, 2000.

Additional resources for educators are presented by Williams and Bauer (2006) and adapted in Table 1: Selected Reference Titles for Children's Literature provides the reference, the author or sponsor and describes the features of each reference.

Table 1  
*Selected Reference Titles for Children's Literature*

Reference	Author/ sponsor	Features
A to Zoo: Subject Access to Children's and Young Adult Literature	Libraries Unlimited	This book provides a subject index and bibliographic information on children's picture books with emphasis on K-2, listing nearly 23,000 titles.
Adventuring With Books: A Booklist for Pre-K—Grade 6	National Council of Teachers of English	This book provides a subject index to informational texts and fiction suitable for elementary students, including multicultural materials.
The Coretta Scott King Awards, 1970 - 2004	American Library Association	This book provides lists of quality multicultural materials.
Great Books for African – American Children	Dutton/Plume	This book lists 250 books that celebrate the African American culture and provides ordering information.
Book Links: Connecting Books, Libraries and Classrooms	American Library Association	This Journal is published six times a year and discusses old and new titles, including book strategies and classroom connections.
Best Books for Children: Preschool Through Grade 6	R. R. Bowker	This book includes brief annotations for 17,140 titles that have had two or three recommendations in leading journals. There are indexes for author, title, illustrator, and subject.
Literature Connections to American History, K-6: Resources to Enhance and Entice	Libraries Unlimited	This book describes historical fiction novels, biographies, history trade books, CD-ROMs, and videotapes about North America.
Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children	American Indian Studies Center	This book evaluates and offers suggestions for selection of books on Native Americans.

Note: Adapted from Williams & Bauer (2006).

Teaching children's literature using cooperative learning provides the opportunity for students to develop greater collaborative skills, increase their perspective taking, increase their retention of material, bring about more on-task behavior, and promotes higher achievement.

Table 2, adapted from Williams & Bauer (2006), provides website information for children's literature web guides. These resources provide access to the websites, sponsors, and a description of the features of each website. Every educator can now access resources to match their students' interests.

Table 2  
*Children's Literature Web Guide*

Website	Sponsor	Features
1. <a href="http://www.sunlink.ucf.edu">www.sunlink.ucf.edu</a>	Funded by State of Florida, maintained by University of Central Florida	Site is available for anyone wishing to search for trade books and materials according to reading levels, interests, and topics.
2. <a href="http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc">www.ala.org/ala/alsc</a>	American Library Association	Site features award winning books and information for teachers and librarians.
3. <a href="http://www.cbcbooks.org">www.cbcbooks.org</a>	The Children's Book Council	This site features new releases, themed books, and information about authors/illustrators. It gives perspectives from teachers, media specialists, and other educators on books and how to use them and information on events such as Children's Book Week.
4. <a href="http://www.reading.org">www.reading.org</a>	International Reading Association	This site features the International Reading Association's "Choices" booklists, links to special interest groups in children's literature, and articles and position statements on authentic reading and writing.
5. <a href="http://www.nsta.org">www.nsta.org</a>	National Science Teachers Association	Site provides links to trade books (K-12) on science topics selected for accuracy and appropriateness and offers lesson plans.
6. <a href="http://www.socialstudies.org">www.socialstudies.org</a>	National Council for the Social Studies	This site links to trade books (K-8) on social studies topics and offers lesson plans.
7. <a href="http://www.ala.org/Booklinks">www.ala.org/Booklinks</a>	American Library Association, online version of the journal Book Links	Site provides comprehensive information for using books in the classroom, including thematic bibliographies with related discussion questions and activities, author and illustrator interviews, and essays.
8. <a href="http://www.lis.uluc.edu/~ccb">www.lis.uluc.edu/~ccb</a>	The Center for Children's Books, at The Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	Site offers bibliographies, the Center for Children's Books best book lists, reading promotion websites, book awards in children's literature, and storytelling links.
9. <a href="http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc">www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc</a>	The Cooperative Children's Book Center, The School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison	This site features bibliographies and booklists of recommended books on a wide range of themes and topics.
10. <a href="http://www.ipl.org">www.ipl.org</a>	The Internet Public Library, The School of Information at the University of Michigan	This site provides links to other online sites on visual literacy and picture books.
11. <a href="http://pbskids.org">http://pbskids.org</a>	Public Broadcasting Service	Site offers more than 3000 free lesson plans and activities under the TeacherSource link.

Note: Adapted from Williams & Bauer (2006).



## Summary

The focus of this paper was to define cooperative learning as an approach that can be used to increase children's enjoyment of literature. Goal structures and the elements of cooperative learning were presented and defined based on the Johnson and Johnson model. A summary of research about both areas, cooperative learning and teaching children's literature, were shared. Examples of children's literature and multiple resources to draw from were included.

Setting the stage for cooperative learning in a literacy classroom helps students think, speak, and write more clearly, listen more attentively and respectfully to others' ideas, take turns in conversations, use text to support their ideas, and become more immersed in working together (Wood et al, 2001).

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